

MIKE SHAYNE



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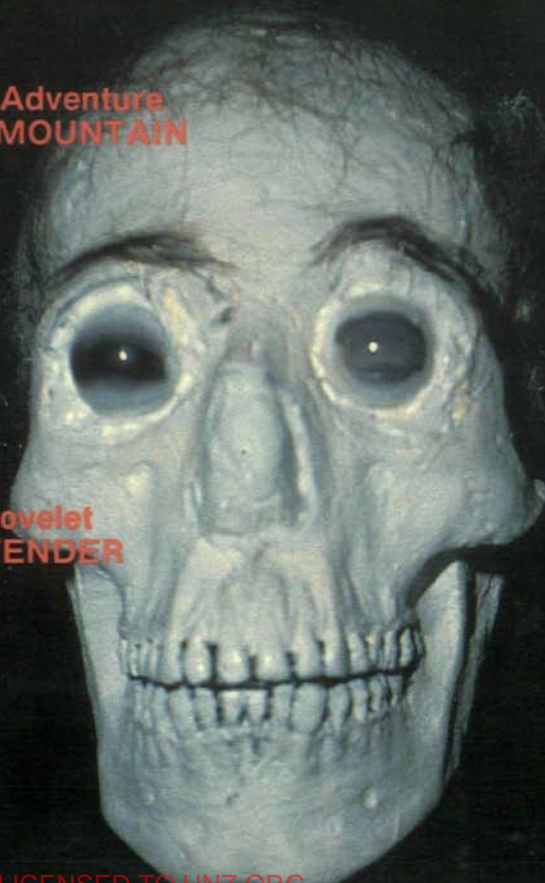
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MIKE SHAYNE

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DEATH ON SKULL MOUNTAIN

by Brett Halliday

Shayne paused in the swamp, listening. In the distance he heard it — a giant foot stepping in mud, pulling loose. Ahead of him a rotted limb cracked. Water splashed. He turned to flee, but something grabbed him, threw him into the murky water. The thing was the size of a grizzly, but it was covered with mud and vines. A cold chill crept up Shayne's spine. It was Death staring at him! 4

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Shayne was cut off. If he were caught, he'd be promptly killed. There was only one place to go — into a jungle no-man's land filled with quicksand, cottonmouths, and a strange creature that stretched the imagination — into the deadly swamp!

Death On Skull Mountain

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE MORNING MIST COVERED THE DARK LAKE LIKE A PROTECTIVE cocoon. It was still too early for the fish to bite, but several birds had already broken their nightly vow of silence. On the north end where the springs fed the lake, a deer cautiously approached, and, satisfied it was alone, dropped its neck to drink.

The single shot echoed through the Smokies with the fury of a sudden thunderstorm. The deer took one step back before it dropped. Immediately the brackish water turned red.

"Got you, sucker," yelled a blond-haired kid with a patch over his right eye. "Been waitin' on you hereabouts since 'fore five."

As the kid drew closer to the fallen creature, he began to curse. Pa'd skin me alive, he thought, as he saw by the absence of antlers that what he had killed was a doe.

There was only one thing he could do, he decided, and that was to get rid of the thing before he was found out. He sure hated to lose all that tender venison, but if he came back with it, his Pa'd take more meat than that out of his hide.

Where to leave it? If he pushed it into the water, it would float. He could weight the deer down and sink it, but with what? He'd only brought a gun, nothing to lash the deer to a heavy stone. Burying was out of the question too because likewise he didn't have a shovel.

Whatever he was going to do, he knew he'd better do it fast. This wasn't the best place to be, and sure as shootin' his shot would attract

somebody. He thought of the county school he'd left last year. It was their damn fault. Damned schoolteacher never taught him anything he could use. Just a bunch a dates and not to say *ain't*.

Craps, almighty, he was in trouble.

Then he had an idea. He got out his belt and tied the deer's four legs together the way he'd seen that cowboy do when his Pa's taken him to the rodeo outside Knoxville. He slung the legs over his shoulder as though the dead animal was a packsack and started off.

There were two places he could hide the doe. That cave he used to play in up on Skull Mountain or that sinkhole on the edge of East Swamp. Both were in the same direction — he'd make up his mind while he went along.

As he started up the mountain, he heard something in the pines off to his right, but when he stopped and looked, he saw nothing. If he threw the doe in the sinkhole, nobody'd ever find it. He remembered the stories how two years ago Uncle Joe had fallen in and disappeared plumb out of sight. That place was dangerous enough especially if he believed the old legends, which of course he didn't, not since he'd grown up anyway. The cave was safer. He doubted somebody would stumble across it as he once had.

The higher he climbed Skull Mountain, the more he began to sweat. The day was going to be a scorcher, and his Pa would have him out in the fields picking before long.

He heard a crack behind him. Somebody had stepped on a branch. He threw the deer down, not worrying about his bloodstained shirt, and pointed the rusty rifle toward the thicket.

"Come on out," he called, with more courage than he had.

THE LONG, STRINGY HAIR TRAILING HALFWAY DOWN HER back was the first thing he saw. "Becky Lou," he exclaimed, "what chu doin' here?"

"What am I doin' here, Buck Wynters," she said, her hands on her hips. "This here be Somers' land, and you know'd it."

"Nobody owns Skull Mountain," he said, lowering his gun. "Least-ways, that's what my Pa allus says."

"And you allus listen to your pa, don't you, Mr. Bucksaw Wynters." He couldn't miss her mockingbird tone.

"Lordy," she shouted, coming up to the dead animal sprawled on the pine-needle path, "you went and killed a doe. I don't know which demon crawled into that little mind a your'n. What ya gonna do

with it?"

He found himself staring through the holey-gingham blouse she was wearing. Her jeans seemed a bit tighter. He said, "Maybe I'm gonna throw it in one of those caves we useta play in when we wuz kids."

"Better not."

"Why? 'Cause a Somers told me notta?"

She stared into his good, coal-black eye and said, "Last week I saw somebody prowlin' 'round there."

"Who? A Somers or a Wynters?"

"Neither one."

"What you sayin', Becky Lou? Ain't been nobody in these parts for years but Wynters and useless Somers."

"Is now," she said.

He hated it when she got that gleam in her green eyes. "Cat's eyes," his father had said. "All Somers gots cat's eyes. Whats makes 'em so sneaky."

"You think you know'd it all, Bucksaw Wynters, just cause you'rn sixteen now. Well, I know something you don't."

He eyed the blonde, wondering how old she really was. Old enough, he decided, that her mother let her put coloring in her hair and old enough that he had layed with her when everybody and everything inside his body and out had told him he shouldn't. "What'd this somebody look like?"

"City folk. Short hair. A man."

"What wuz he doin'?"

"Just kneelin' 'side that cave we used to call our home."

"Sheeet, Becky Lou, we wuz kids then." He slung the doe over his shoulder and, picking up his gun, started down the mountain through the woods.

"Where you goin'?" she called, following behind him like his baby sister, Pearl.

"East Swamp."

"You got more balls than brains, Buck."

"Why?"

"Nobody goes inta East Swamp, 'cept your dumb Uncle Joe, and he ain't nowheres to be seen now."

"I know that. Sinkhole got him."

"No, it didn't."

"Yes, it did."

She tugged on his flannel shirt. "My brother Jerry Lee says that

ain't what kilt him."

"We never found Uncle Joe. What do you think he did? Pulled up stakes and lit out for Atlanta."

"Hotlanta."

"What?"

"Hotlanta, that's what Cousin Aggie says they call it now." She was walking ahead of him, her long finger softly stroking her hair. "Bucky, wouldn't you like to take me down to Hotlanta? They got hotels there with beds made a water, and that's a whole lot softer than the floor of that old fishin' cabin."

"Beds a water. Becky Lou, you been smokin' some a Pa's hemp?"

She laughed. "Pot, grass, marijuana. Nobody but a Wynters would call it hemp, and nobody but a Wynters be dumb enough to go into East Swamp where it lives."

"It?"

"The Swampster. Leastaways that's what my daddy allus calls it. Says it guards Skull Mountain."

"What fer?" he laughed. "'Cause the Sheriff's 'fraid to come out here." He quickened his pace to put some distance between them as they continued down the hill. "Well, I ain't feared a no Somers' superstition."

"You come back here," she called, not movin' after him. "We got things, important things, to talk about, you and me."

"Like what?" he called, neither stopping nor looking back.

She shouted an obscenity he'd never heard his mother use, but the rest of what she yelled was garbled by the thick woods. The pine needles gradually turned to mud, and flies hung everywhere, especially those bloodsuckers. Sure, he had heard the legends of the swamp, but he wasn't going to not go in there just because she said not to, not on the day he'd killed a doe. Women and does. World was too full a them. And what for? They didn't like to harvest hemp or hunt or make a little shine. They wanted to go places like Atlanta and raise babies and put forget-me-nots in the front yard.

He heard the noise off to his left. A soft, sucking sound like he made slurping water. He looked around. He was farther into the swamp than he'd thought, farther than he'd ever been before. Nothing looked familiar. Just a lot of cottonwood and a lot of flies. A long, black snake slithered passed his boots.

The sucking sound was closer.

"Becky Lou?" he said. "That you?"

Only the sucking.

"Quit funnin' me," he said. Hell, here was as good as anywhere to dump the carcass. He threw the doe down and removed his belt. He knew he'd better get straightaways to the house before his father came looking for him to help harvest the hemp.

He turned around.

"Oh, Jesus," he screamed suddenly. "Oh, save me, Jesus," he repeated, wishing to hell he had taken Becky Lou, even if she did have cat's eyes, to those beds a water.

II

THE EARLY-MORNING SUN GLANCED OFF THE GLASSY WATER, sending golden shafts scattering through the silent air. A slight chill still hung in the dewy heaviness as a solitary jay squealed reveille. It could have been daybreak of the first day man walked in Eden.

Suddenly a sharp plunk cut through the water's placid surface sending ripples out in rapid circles.

"Dammit, Mike, how the hell do you expect to catch any fish?" Police Chief Will Gentry threw his lure-covered Orvis hat down on the muddy bank. "Maybe if you were Ron Guidry you could pick them off with rocks."

Mike Shayne fired up a Camel and laid his Garcia rod and reel beside him. "Will, if you had as much luck with criminals as you have locating fishing holes, you'd be out of a job. I thought you said we could slay the fish up here."

"I used to," said the burly policeman, chewing on the black stub of a cigar he had clenched between his teeth. "I can remember getting the limit for days on end. Folks said there was nothing like the taste of a Paradise Lake bass."

"Used to. How long ago is 'used to'?"

Gentry pushed his restored hat back on his head. As if he didn't hear the question, he fumbled with the line.

"Will," said Shayne.

"Oh, a few years ago. Well . . . more like . . . twenty."

"Twenty years ago," exploded the redhead. "You get me to give away two seats to the Dolphins' game with the Giants, drive me a thousand miles non-stop to northern Georgia, and plop me down at some God-forsaken pond because there was good fishing here twenty years ago?"

"Come on, Mike, lighten up. Sure, I lied a little, but I did it because I knew you needed to get away from the city as bad as I did." Gentry's

sweaty fingers drove the cigar butt into the ground. "I don't mind telling you things have been getting under my skin lately."

Shayne popped the top on a can of Bud he had liberated from a beat-up Coleman behind him. "Mine too. Did you see that last mosquito that dive-bombed me? He had a stinger the size of a jack-hammer."

Gentry didn't laugh. He stared vacantly at the dark water. "Maybe my time's come to chuck it all and let somebody else take care of Miami's problems."

SHAYNE HAD NEVER SEE HIS OLD FRIEND IN SUCH A FUNK. Maybe Will was going through the same period of doubt that he had passed through a few months ago. A time of questioning whether what you do really matters, whether trying to uphold right is ultimately a fool's gambit. "Will," he said, "you know Miami would break off and float away if you ever called it quits."

"Mike, I'm no quitter. I've been to hell and back in my years on the force, and I've never even whimpered, but . . ."

"Are the city fathers on your back again?" Shayne said, swigging the brew.

"That's part of it, I guess. Just last week a grand jury found that our officers are trained to use a gun too often too fast. Dammit, I'd like to get one of those bank V.P.'s or insurance salesmen down in Liberty City about 2 A.M. Let the bastard walk into a burnt-out tenement looking for a drug deal that's going down — we'd see what he thought about weapon restraint then."

"You've been fighting that kind of ignorance for years. It'd take more than a few rabid do-gooders to make you hang it up."

"Regulations aren't the biggest problem. It's just that, well, everything has changed. We're the bad guys now. The boys in blue wear hats of black. What ever happened to respect for the uniform?" Gentry's normally beef-colored face was turning rare. "The City Council will fund some artist to drape a few islands off the coast in pink cloth, but can't find the bucks to get my men a little decent training."

"We all have to live with change," said Shayne.

"I used to think that too," said Gentry, "and I thought that we could handle whatever came along. But, Mike, it's getting crazier out there every day. Maybe I shouldn't expect the everyday Joe to look up to the uniform when we just busted up a gang of fake cops out in the sub-

urbs.”

“Fake?”

“Yeah, with badges, uniforms, cars — the whole shooting match. These jokers would zero in on a family known to have a lot of cash on hand. They’d come screaming up, surround the house, flash badges and search warrants, then once inside the house, they’d rob the people. It all happened in minutes, but guess who got all the heat?”

“Still, most people look up to cops.”

“Tell that to Officers Sweet and Rideout. They answered a call down in Overtown last month. Some domestic disturbance. They cuffed a guy and were putting him in the black and white when a group of onlookers jumped them. Sweet was lucky — a mere broken nose and only a few bruised ribs.”

“What about Rideout?”

“His wife didn’t look very good in black.”

“Didn’t anybody try to help them?” said Shayne. He handed a beer to Gentry, who took a long pull.

“Mike, you got to realize that it’s a cultural thing. We’re in the minority in Miami.”

“Wait a minute, Will. I don’t like the sound of that. You’ve never been one to judge a man by his color or birthplace.” The redhead’s voice was almost a growl.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m making no pat damnations. I’m just saying that with Miami 60% Hispanic and 20% black, it’s hard to convince people in the streets that we’re not the enemy. We come riding into their neighborhoods with shotguns and riot helmets — hell, it’s like a war zone.”

“The cops in any big city must have the same problems. It comes with the territory.”

“But Miami’s problems are compounded by its location. We’re overcrowded. The Mariel boatlift alone brought in 150,000 people. These people gotta eat, they gotta have roofs over their head. And we both know that the quick money’s not in blue-collar jobs. Those kids see the pimps and cocaine cowboys driving the Caddies and wearing Adolpho — they want it too.” Gentry crushed the empty beer can in his massive hand. “You can buy anything you want in Miami from Columbian prime drugs to rare African Gabon vipers.”

Shayne could see that reasoning with his friend at the moment was useless. The police chief was on a roll, and the big redhead thought it best to let him get the venom out of his system.

"Even the seemingly normal people can go over the edge any time. Homicide brought in an unemployed warehouse worker on Labor Day. Poor slob got to thinking about his troubles, so he grabbed a .30-.30 and went on a tear. His tear killed eight people. The judge said he needed psychiatric help. Hell, Mike, we all need a shrink." Gentry dropped his head. "The way things are, I wonder if anybody really needs our help or wants it."

Before Shayne could answer, a shrill scream split the damp morning air.

"Please help me. They're after me. Please."

At the top of the ridge about thirty yards above the two fishermen stood a willowy blonde.

III

BEFORE THE TWO MEN FROM MIAMI COULD REACT, THE GIRL began to slide down the hill toward them.

"There goes the neighborhood," said Gentry.

Even at fifty feet Shayne could spot the fear — the white eyes, the pale face. Well, it wasn't Flagler St. and there was no Lucy Hamilton to greet her, but even in the middle of the Georgia mountains trouble continued to seek him out. It had been that way in New Orleans; it had been that way in Texas, where he had ridden oil rigs. Maybe his beautiful secretary was right, that he attracted trouble as surely as a magnet did iron filings.

"Please help me," she pleaded. "They killed Buck. I saw them, and now they're gonna shoot me."

"Whoa," said the big redhead. He couldn't help but notice that though her body spelled out woman in curvy letters, her face was that of a child. She didn't look old enough to drive a car, if they drove cars in this neck of the woods.

"Bucky, Buck Wynters, he's my boyfriend, unofficial of course," she said. "We wuz strollin' above East Swamp when we had this argument and . . ."

"Careful, Mike," said Gentry, spitting a stream of tobacco-chewings into the water. "Next she'll be trying to sell you that swamp."

She stared at Shayne through disturbed pools of green.

"Don't mind my friend," said the rangy investigator. "Just go on."

"Buck didn't come after me like he allus does when we have words. So after a spell I went back to the swamp to find him, but he weren't there," so I went to the cave." She caught her breath. "That's what Buck used to call the nose of Skull Mountain." She pointed up over the

ridge. "We used to play there as kids."

"That must have been a long time ago," groused Gentry without looking up.

Shayne said, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No," she said emphatically. "We don't have time for that. Don't you understand? Buck wasn't at the cave, but these men were. They wuz carryin' all kinds of boxes and tools and stuff into the cave. Then one of them saw me."

"What did these men look like?" said the redhead, cocking a craggy brow and rasping a thumbnail across the day-old stubble. "Did you know them?"

"Never seen 'em 'fore. They had the kind of uniforms soldiers wear. They got them brown and green tiger stripes like they been tie-died."

"Camouflage fatigues," said Shayne.

"If they were there," said Gentry, "and I doubt it, they were probably some National Guard unit on summer maneuvers."

"Well, mister," she said to the burly police chief, "are those Guard people s'pose to shoot at folks that ain't done them no harm?"

"They shot at you?" said Shayne.

"Yeah, the one that seen me. Then he lit out after me, and I ran like a scared deer till I came across you twos."

The redhead stole a glance out of the corner of his eye at the embankment down which she had just slid. There was nothing he could see that didn't fit into the northern Georgia foothills, but the hair on the back of his neck stood at attention. Since trouble was his only life-long companion, Shayne had developed a sixth sense in self-defense.

"Will," the redhead said under his breath, "we're being watched."

"Of course we are," said Gentry. "Probably by one of her relatives. This scam's as old as these hills. Next she'll get us to take her into the cabin. Then miraculously her shotgun-toting father and brothers'll show up. They'll be cursing and yelling about their family honor. The scared city-slickers can either marry Daisy Mae or soothe the family honor with an ancient home remedy called hard American cash."

"My name ain't Daisy Mae, mister," she shot back. "It's Becky Lou, and we Somers don't treat folks like that."

The way the redhead read the situation she was telling the truth or she was one helluvan actress. Watching her lithe body shake like a palm frond in a hurricane, Shayne picked the former.

"Give her a Bud for her performance, Mike," said Gentry. "On

second thought, nix the brew. The local constable would suddenly show up and throw us in his hokey pokey for contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

Once again Shayne passed over his good friend's comment. "Humor me, Will. Let's head up to the cabin. If there is somebody up there with a weapon, he's got the high ground."

"She baited her hook, Mike. I've baited mine," he said flipping his purple worm into the murky water. "Let's see who gets the first nibble."

"You ain't gonna get no fish outta there, City," she said disdainfully. "Ain't been a fish took outta Fire Lake in ten years."

"I thought you called this place Paradise, Will," said Shayne.

"Folks round here," she said, "call it Fire Lake."

"It would be Paradise," said the cop, "if I could get a little peace and quiet. Mike, if you two want to play games, count me out."

Shayne saw the thunk in the water at the same time the report came rolling down the hillside.

The big detective threw the girl down on the ground.

"You believe me now?" she said.

THE REDHEAD SCANNED THE HILLSIDE FOR A GLEAM. SEEING nothing, he glanced at Gentry, who had crawled behind the Coleman cooler. The cop had out his long-barreled .38. Gentry had probably put the gun in his creel. The revolver, Shayne knew, was closer to the police chief than his wife. The redhead regretted leaving his own Smith & Wesson in the cabin with the supplies.

"Get her inside," growled Gentry, "but keep your tails low."

Shayne nodded.

"I'm gonna count to five," said the chief, "and fire off some shots. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five."

As the Miami cop's bullets whistled into the Georgia pines, Shayne yelled, "Let's go," to the girl and took off running in a crouch. He zigzagged to the cabin, slugs splattering around him in the red clay. He ducked behind an ancient walnut and looked around.

The blonde had frozen about half-way between him and Gentry. "Come on," he said with encouragement. "You're an open target out there."

"I . . . I . . . can't," she screamed.

Shayne saw instantly that this wasn't the time to reason with her. Some people reacted well to pressure and she didn't. "You spot him,

Will?" Shayne called.

"About a hundred yards up. Near that ledge."

"Cover me."

The cop pointed his revolver upward and squeezed off two quick rounds.

Shayne broke instantly for where the blonde sat shuddering in a fetal huddle. He grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder, and sprinted back toward the cabin. Two shots whined past his ear.

"I don't want to die," she wailed. "I don't want to die."

From the lake's edge Gentry fired and then again.

"I'm out, shamus," the cop called. "There's a box of shells in my duffel bag."

Shayne took the door out as he entered the cabin and threw her down behind the stone fireplace. He yanked his Smith & Wesson from a rough-hewn desk drawer, collected Gentry's shellbox, and headed back outside.

The big cop was pinned down behind the lakeside embankment.

"Will," Shayne called and lobbed the box of shells as if they had been a grenade.

The burly cop scraped the cardboard box off the ground and rammed six shells into the hot cylinder. "I can't spot the bastard, but he's got a good shot at us. He's worked himself into that clump of trees over there." Gentry pointed to a group of pines about one-hundred yards up the hill.

"I'll cover you," said Shayne. "Empty your pistol into the trees to show me where you think he is, then break for the cabin."

Gentry fired rapidly. As the cop rose to run, a burst of sound came from the pines.

Shayne spotted the muzzle fire and emptied his .38 in that direction. "Come on, you old warhorse," he called.

When he got no response from the direction of the lake, the big detective looked up from reloading his piece.

Gentry lay on the red clay, and he wasn't moving.

IV

SHAYNE SNAPPED OFF A COUPLE OF ROUNDS, THEN ALLIGATOR-CRAWLED toward his friend. The sharpshooter fired back, but his bullets were well over the detective's head.

Gentry lay face down. Shayne put his hand out on the cop. He felt warm.

Gentry coughed. "Took one, the right shoulder," he gasped.

"Hurts, hurts real bad."

Shayne looked at the blood oozing through the torn shirt.

"It's an M-16 he's shooting," said the wounded cop. "How does the arm look?"

"Bad enough so you won't have to worry about filling out any forms for awhile." Shayne fired a shot into the trees. "We've gotta get you to the cabin."

"I guess I was wrong about the scam."

"Yeah, Pappy's got more than a shotgun up there. Can you get up on my back?" The redhead lay down.

"Think so." Slowly Gentry inched himself onto the detective's back, stifling a scream of pain twice.

"Hold on now," grunted Shayne. "We only get to practice this drill once."

The big detective strained every muscle in his rock-hard body as he dragged himself and the burly police chief through the underbrush. He knew how a thoroughbred horse must feel when it was asked to carry too much weight. Shayne felt he could break down any second. And he knew there was a man with a gun not far away who would happily put him and his heavyweight jockey out of their misery.

A shot whizzed past Shayne's ear and cut into the bark of a pine. Another ripped up a divot of clay. It seemed almost as though the sniper was toying with the struggling detective.

Dammit, thought the redhead, nobody plays games with Mike Shayne — unless he's ready to lose and lose big.

But right now he had to get Gentry to the shelter of the cabin. His friend needed care fast. Even with all his years of watching men bleed, Shayne couldn't tell just how bad the crusty cop's wound really was, not under the present battlefield conditions.

The cabin was in sight. Another twenty yards and at least momentary safety and a chance to assess the situation. Sweat drenched the redhead's body, and with every jerky movement Gentry groaned in intense pain.

"Hang in there, Will. Just a few seconds more and you can climb off your favorite old swayback."

Gentry didn't answer. He had blacked out from the pain — or worse.

"Stand away from the doorway," Shayne yelled as he pulled himself and Gentry behind the Blazer that the police chief had rented for their fishing trip to Paradise. Just ten or so more yards and they were home free.

With one deep breath Shayne stood and, pulling Gentry over his massive shoulder, bolted for the open doorway. Shots rained round him like deadly hailstones. One slammed into the Blazer's radiator, sending antifreeze in a green arch onto the ground. Another flattened the right, thick-threaded tire. A third split some rough wood from the cabin's top step. A fourth bit into the porch so close to Shayne's boot that he could feel the impact.

The redhead covered the last few feet in an awkward dive. He and Gentry sprawled headlong into the cabin's pine floor.

"Mister, I wuz so scared," wailed the blonde from her hiding place beneath the stone hearth. "They're going to kill us all, just like they did Buck."

"Not if I can help it," spat out Shayne as he rolled Gentry onto the cot in the back of the room. Because the cabin butted against the side of the hill, they had momentary safety. "See what you can do," he said to her, "to help my friend. He's been shot pretty bad."

The young girl seemed to forget about her fear. With a genuine concern in her eyes, she crossed to the bed, and before Shayne could say anything else, she ripped the shirt from around Gentry's shoulder. "Fetch me that towel and basin of water so I can clean this here wound," she said. "We Somers have a reputation round these parts of bein' pretty good healers."

Realizing that his friend was in good hands, Shayne decided to put an end to the shooting match he had so unwillingly become a target for. He reloaded the .38 and slipped out of the cabin's back door.

With a little luck, the redhead reasoned, he could angle around from behind the cabin and get above the sniper. He would have to get in close to use the gun he had tucked into the small of his back.

As he slithered his way through the vines and sticky bushes, Shayne hoped that his attacker was alone. Getting the drop on one man trained to use a rifle would be difficult — two would be impossible under these conditions. In any case he had to work fast. Gentry was hurt bad, and the two people in the cabin were now defenseless.

Shayne put his right hand down on a dark vine in front of him. The vine moved. It was a copperhead, the area's deadliest snake. Shayne knew that any sudden move would mean a slow, agonizing death. Holding his breath, he withdrew his hand gradually and steadily.

The snake remained motionless.

Shayne reached for a broken branch with his left hand. Using the stick as he had seen the handlers at Miami Serpentarium, he pinned

the brown killer's head. Grasping the copperhead, he slung it as far as he could into the trees.

He'd have to be more careful, thought Shayne. There was more than one killer in these woods.

WHEN HE FIGURED THAT HE HAD CIRCLED WIDELY ENOUGH, the detective started to move back toward the cabin. He was glad it was early fall and the leaves and twigs were green and damp. One snap might betray his strategy to the enemy, whoever he was.

Shayne spotted the uniform about twenty-five yards in front of him. The massive figure crouched behind an old fallen tree, his M-16 resting on the rotten wood.

The redhead knew he would only get one chance. Sure, he could get a little closer and blow the sucker away, but then he would lose the chance to find out what was going on. Soldiers didn't ordinarily fire on civilians, especially pretty, young girls. Maybe it was the detective in him, but he had to get to the bottom of things.

His hand reached behind him and retrieved the Smith & Wesson. The steel felt cool in Shayne's sweaty hand. He inched closer until he was barely ten yards away.

"O.K., pal, drop the hardware or be buried with it." He made a show of pulling back the .38's hammer.

Slowly the hulking soldier pivoted to face the detective. He seemed to have stepped right out of the jungles of Vietnam. His face was covered with boot-black used so often in Southeast Asia on search-and-destroy missions. Shayne hadn't seen any since his recent confrontation with The Rogue, the Miami cop who went on a rampage as the result of delayed stress syndrome.

As the figure let the M-16 drop to the ground, Shayne moved in. The brute must have been 6'5" and 240 pounds. Behind the blackened face was a pair of vacant eyes, eyes Shayne had seen many times before, the eyes of a killer.

"What the hell's going on?" said the detective.

Silence.

"I don't have time for twenty questions, pal." Shayne raised his gun and advanced to within a couple of feet of the brute.

Still nothing.

Shayne didn't see the kick coming, but he felt the combat boot crack into his wrist. The pistol flew into the air, and the uniformed figure flew into the redhead. The two men fell to the ground hard. If Gentry

were heavy, thought Shayne, this escapee from Championship Wrestling would break the scales.

They rolled into the underbrush, the branches bending and recoiling in their path. The soldier sledgehammered a right to Shayne's jaw. The detective knew he wouldn't have to visit the dentist this month, at least not for any tooth pulling. He felt the salty, warm trickle gather in his mouth.

The giant tried another right, but Shayne blocked it and countered with a hammer of his own.

The uniformed hulk reeled backward with the force of the blow.

Shayne scrambled to his feet and pounced on the fallen figure. He drove a left, then a right into the boot-blackened face. He felt the nose give with the second punch.

He jerked the defeated man to a standing position. "Now talk to me, pal," he growled at the groggy figure.

Instead of an answer, the man pulled loose from Shayne's grip and staggered up the hill. The redhead leaped at the flying figure, catching him around the legs. As the soldier pitched forward, Shayne heard a groan.

Then the uniformed man lay motionless on the incline.

Not knowing what had happened, Shayne cautiously rolled the figure on his back. Blood smeared the front of the green and brown shirt. Not even a master torturer like his old nemesis Ho Lu could have made this guy talk.

A blood-covered root jutted out from the ground.

Looking down at his dead adversary, Shayne noticed something for the first time. The uniform had no identifying patches or insignias.

V

SHAYNE SLAMMED HIS FIST AGAINST THE 4X4'S FENDER AS he looked at the gaping hole in the radiator. The tumbling slug had done its damage. No way the Blazer was going to get them out of the woods.

"Our house is down the road 'bout a mile or so," she said.

"I need to get him to a doctor fast," said Shayne.

"Pa's got an old truck. It ain't much, but it'll git you down to Doc Stair in Beulah."

Using a hatchet, the redhead knocked the legs off the cot Will Gentry had brought along. It was a crude traverse, but it would serve the purpose.

It felt more like ten miles to her house. With his friend lashed to the

traverse, Shayne's muscles ached with each step. At least the blonde knew her nursing. Gentry was sleeping, and the bleeding from his shoulder had stopped. The old cop had been lucky. The slug had sliced through the meaty part of his shoulder like a dull sword. Had it been two inches to the left it could have torn his shoulder off.

The clay road was rutted and bumpy with dips and rises. The farther he got from the slain Blazer, the farther he seemed from civilization. The woods closed in around them as though time had abandoned the forest when man first appeared. Only one thing linked the two worlds he knew — violence.

The Somers' cabin looked like a picture torn from one of those poverty reports on Appalachia. It had walls of wooden Swiss Cheese, and the small building to the rear signaled Shayne not to expect indoor plumbing. Smoke wisped out of the chimney, and the redhead could smell the aroma of bacon.

"Mama, Papa, come quick," called the blonde.

The door opened and out trekked a tall, heavy man with a graying beard and mustache. His hair was close-cropped, and his face appeared as weathered as the boards of his cabin.

"Becky Lou Somers," he growled, "how many times, child, I got to learn ya we ain't got no truck with strangers."

"Pa, this man done saved my life." She pointed at Shayne. "Some soldiers wuz chasin' me, and he took care of them real proper."

"Young'un, is this another of those tales you tell when you're really slippin' off with that Wynters boy?"

"Honest, Pa. You can tell his friend's been shot and needs doctorin' real bad. I said you'd repay him by loanin' him the truck."

Shayne put the traverse down gently. Approaching the still-disbelieving father, he stuck out his right hand and said, "I'm Mike Shayne."

The man stared at him hostilely. Then he thrust his hand forward and grasped Shayne's. The big detective hadn't felt a stronger grip from the muscleboys who paraded through Miami's underground.

"Name's Reuben Somers. What brings you to Skull Mountain, Shayne?"

"A little fishing."

"Ain't been no fish in Fire Lake for nigh on ten years."

"Unfortunately that's what I found out."

"Why don't you get yourself out the same way you got in?"

"The man who was stalking your daughter disabled my Blazer."

"Yeah, we heard all the shootin'. We thought it was just them Wynters poachin' on our land agin." He turned to his daughter. "Now, Becky Lou, why don't you go in the house and help your Mama with the work."

She obeyed instantly.

Somers stuffed a few shreds of tobacco into his cheek and sat down on his stoop. "Shayne, I'm obliged to thank ya for helpin' my daughter. Can't say, though, I'm surprised at what you say happened. Dadburn Wynters been nothin' but trouble since they moved onto this mountain."

"How long ago was that?" said the redhead as he torched a cigarette.

Somers spit a steady stream toward a flat rock. "'Bout a hundred years ago. Gave my granddaddy fits, my daddy. Always tryin' to horn in on your land. They've tried every trick in the book. Lost a barn while back to a strange fire. Some of my prime beef disappeared down by the swamp. Then there was that lawyer frm Atlanta in his flashy car who showed up two years ago. I knowed he weren't no real lawyer even if he did drive that silver Mercedes. Tried to buy this land from me. Nosiree, some things in this world ain't for sale."

Shayne said, "I only saw one soldier, but your daughter claims she spotted a whole lot more higher up the mountain."

"Don't surprise me none. Old Cy Wynters figured that if he couldn't get us out any other way, he'd go and hire him some guns to do it for him." Brown juice oozed out the corners of his mouth. "Still, Old Cy may slit your throat, but he's the kinda man who'd want to spit in your eye whilst he was a-doin' it."

Shayne wondered if he and Will had wandered into the middle of nothing more than a blood feud that had started longer ago than anybody could recall over something nobody could remember. That didn't matter — saving Will Gentry did. "About your truck?" he said.

"That old Ford ain't started since I took my wife, Effie, down to the Beulah dry goods last spring, but let's have a look-see."

ONE LOOK-SEE AT THE RUSTED-OUT PICKUP CONVINCED THE redhead that even Smiling Sam, the Used Car Man, couldn't have unloaded this clunker on his best day. Somers pulled a limb off the hood, brushed some cobwebs off the door, and climbed into the battered cab. He pumped the accelerator a few times and turned the key that had been left in the ignition.

Instantly the engine turned over with a roar that sounded like Memorial Day at Indianapolis.

Somers patted the dashboard and said, "Bessie's got a few miles on her, but she can still go."

"What kind of power plant you got in this old thing?" said the redhead, stubbing out his butt in the ashtray.

"427 Chevy with three deuces."

It sounded to Shayne as if the old man were ready for the street corner drags.

"Bessie," said Somers, "used to run those revenooers crazy 'tween here and Knoxville. Better homemade shine, I allus says, than government welfare."

Shayne knew he had run into one of the last of the rugged individualists. One of the few who took care of himself and his family on his own terms, no matter what the cost. Hell, in an earlier age the man would have been a hero — now he was a nut.

"Can you help me load my friend on the back?"

Shayne knew the soldier had not been alone, and somebody was bound to come looking for him. And even a Cub Scout would be able to follow the trail left by the traverse. No matter who the dead soldier was, somebody would have to pay.

"Got an old mattress in the house that'll make your friend more comfortable on the ride to Beulah," said Somers.

He came out of the house a minute later with a torn mattress that he tossed on back. The redhead bent down to pick up his end of the traverse when he heard shouting.

"Pa, Pa."

Shayne looked up to see a barefoot teenage boy in bib overalls and no shirt.

"Pa, Pa," the kid continued, "there be a bunch of men in uniforms comin', and they all got guns."

VI

"HOW FAR AWAY?" SAID SHAYNE.

"Half-hour at most," said the kid.

"How many?" pressed the detective.

"Three."

"Jerry Lee," said Reuben Somers, "you fetch your mother and sister, and take them down to Miss Lillie's."

"No, Pa. Please, let me stay with you and him."

"Me and Mr. Shayne got some business to tend to," said the

bearded man. "Now scat."

"Pa?"

"Nothin's gonna happen to you down by the marsh. Git your tail outta here 'fore I heat it up for you."

As the kid walked slowly toward his house, Shayne said, "What about my friend?"

"Let's load him in back. Jerry Lee'll get them all to safety."

"You're planning on taking on those soldiers?" said the redhead.

Reuben Somers answered, "A little birdshot in their tails, and maybe Wynters'll leave me alone. A man's gotta take a stand."

Shayne pondered the situation. Will Gentry was in trouble, but if they stayed here they were all vulnerable. The cabin sat in a clearing and made an easy target. Even a bunch of kids in gun-safety class could pin down a battle-proven squad inside. If he stayed with Somers, they could at the very least buy time for the others. Besides, he had a responsibility. Had he not killed that soldier, the trio wouldn't be marching down the road looking for answers — or revenge. He said, "Who is Miss Lillie?"

"Some say a witch," said Somers, taking one end of the cot. "Now you want me to lift this by myself?"

As they loaded the still-unconscious and bloody body, the cabin door opened. Out came Becky Lou and Jerry Lee followed by Reuben's wife. On seeing Effie, Shayne's jaw dropped noticeably. She was young enough to be the bearded man's daughter. She looked about thirty. Her cornsilk hair fell almost to her waist. She was wearing a man's large workshirt, which her ample breasts caused to bulge perceptibly. Like her daughter she possessed green eyes that in the morning light seemed to glow with a life of their own.

"Don't cha worry 'bout your friend none," said Becky Lou. "Mama's one of the few folks that gits along with Miss Lillie, and Miss Lillie's real good at roots and herbs, even if people claim all her mumblin's really talkin' with the Devil. Shoot, just last fall she fixed up my cousin Aggie when a cottonmouth bit her."

The blonde woman walked up to Shayne. Her eyes lowered, she said, "I 'preciate what you done for my Rebecca."

As she walked away, the redhead reflected that this was a woman who with a little makeup and the right dress would be the center of attention at any of Miami Beach's social events.

Jerry Lee jumped behind the wheel and cranked up the old Ford. The other two squeezed into the cab.

"You drive careful, boy," warned the father, "and keep your left tire on the high, dry ground."

"Yes, sir," said the boy.

With a lurch the truck started up, jumped another time, and then was gone.

"We've got about fifteen minutes at most before they get here," said Shayne. "You got a gun?"

"Two. A 12-gauge double-barrel and a .22 rifle."

Shayne didn't have to ask if his host knew how to handle them.

"Give me the .22," said Shayne when the mountain man returned with the weapons. "I think the best plan is to just let them follow my trail in to here. I'll circle around behind them."

"Sounds good to me. Then we'll have them in a crossfire."

Somers tossed Shayne a box of shells.

"The soldier I saw," said the redhead, "had an M-16. Our only advantage is to outflank them."

"Never met a Wynters that couldn't be outflanked," said Somers with a wink.

SHAYNE WENT ABOUT A HUNDRED YARDS INTO THE WOODS. The sun intermittently burned through the green canopy, and the redhead felt warm in his jeans and fishing jacket. This time he was careful where he stepped. He had no desire to see Miss Lillie's snake-bite treatment firsthand. Gradually he cut back till he found himself on a bluff that overlooked both the Somers' cabin in the distance and the road. He found himself a vantage point in the crotch of an old oak that lightning had split years ago.

The rawboned investigator put all thought of a cigarette away. Funny, he told himself, he had come to Paradise Lake to escape Miami and have a few good times with a good friend, but instead he had found hell. Maybe trouble didn't follow. Maybe it was everywhere, and somehow it was his destiny to have to confront it.

Suddenly fate thrust three soldiers in front of Shayne. Their advance had been quiet. In triangular fashion they appeared on the road. The man on the point was noticeably bigger. His eyes kept darting from the ground to the terrain ahead. Shayne knew he was a pro as much as if he had been wearing a label. The other two walked tensely and stiffly like their uniforms had been cut from tin. Their eyes darted from side to side, but not for observation. Unlike the lead man, they were scared.

The point man halted as the Somers' homestead came into view. Using hand signals he deployed the two soldiers left and right. When he was satisfied they were moving as he wanted them, he knelt behind a small boulder.

Shayne buried himself in the oak's crotch. His fishing gear, being tan, helped him blend into the tree. The soldier who had gone right positioned himself almost directly below the big detective.

"All right, hick," called out the point man, "haul your ass out here or we're going to air condition that shack of yours the easy way."

Somers' answer was short and loud. The pellets sandblasted the top of the rock that protected the point man.

This time he didn't raise his head above the boulder as he said, "That cuts it. We tried to be nice, even buy this miserable dump. Now we're done asking." He pumped his closed fist upward. "We're telling you to get out."

The soldier below Shayne fired a burst in the general direction of the cabin as did the one across the road. Shayne could tell from the way both held their rifles, the way the weapons jerked to the side, that these men were uncomfortable in the role of soldiers.

Shayne gripped the .22 in one hand.

The point man yelled, "I don't see a white flag, hillbilly."

Shayne lept.

"We've got you surrounded," continued the point man.

Shayne landed on the soldier's back, driving him into the damp ground.

"We're coming in after you," yelled the leader.

The fallen soldier twisted his neck to see Shayne. As the redhead coldcocked him with the rifle butt, he noticed that the man was in his forties. Pretty old for a raw recruit.

The two remaining soldiers started toward the cabin. A sudden blast from Somers' 12-gauge sent them spreadeagling to the red clay.

Shayne went into phase two of his impromptu battle plan. Crouching, he bolted across the dirt road.

M-16's chattered ahead of him.

Their fire would mask his approach. Quickly he slid along the shrubbery that bordered the road till he was within striking distance.

Shayne noticed that the second man had hung back, not advancing with the leader. All the better, he thought, as he crept up behind the figure.

Using a choke hold taught him by his martial arts *sensei*, Greg Chen,

the detective reached around the soldier's throat with his log-like arms and squeezed.

The point man was almost to the cabin. He had put the M-16 on auto and sent a burst of steel that splintered the wood across the front of Somers' house. "One last time, asshole," he said, "if you don't come out now, the next burst will cut this place down to the size of that outhouse over there."

Reuben Somers didn't answer.

"You're surrounded, hick," shouted the soldier triumphantly.

"Somehow, pal," said Shayne, training the .22 on the man's spine, "I think you've got that backwards."

VII

THE TRAPPED SOLDIER'S BODY TWITCHED AS HE STOOD between Shayne and Reuben Somers, who knelt on his porch with the .12 gauge. The redhead could almost hear the debate going on in the point man's mind: I can kill the hick . . . but his shotgun might still get me . . . and that guy behind me, whoever he is and whatever he's got, is a sure bet to squeeze his trigger.

Shayne helped the man make his decision. "You got three seconds to drop it, pal, or I'm going to give you a bad case of lead poisoning."

The soldier made a quick decision. The M-16 thudded to the ground.

Reuben Somers rested his shotgun on the bridge of the uniformed man's nose. "Now that we see things eye to eye," he said, "I want to know how much the Wynters are payin' you to scare us out."

The soldier stared blankly ahead.

Somers made a display of cocking both barrels. "Now as you wus sayin'?"

The redhead assessed the situation. Their captive seemed cut from the same military cloth as the sniper he had fought in the woods. Both were warriors. Something, though, didn't jibe. While these two looked as though they had cut their teeth on the infiltration course, the two he had ambushed beside the road were older, less physically fit, and apt to be cut up on an infiltration course. Shayne said, "Who did hire you? What are you doing here?"

For several minutes Shayne and Somers tried various ways to persuade their captive to open up, but with no luck. Finally Somers spouted a dark stream on the the man's fatigues. "'Pears to me he's the silent type, but I know somebody'll get him wailin' like a scared billy goat."

"Who's that?" said Shayne.

“Why Miss Lillie, of course.”

SOMERS LED THEM DOWN THE MOUNTAIN, FOLLOWING THE recent tire marks left by the old Ford. Between them marched the still-silent soldier, his hands lashed behind his back.

As they neared the swamp, they passed the parked truck, then crossed a rickety wooden bridge that could have been made by Daniel Boone himself. Stepping onto the other side, Shayne felt the air grow heavier. A thin layer of acrid smoke perched atop the wet sawgrass. The place sounded like the Miami Zoo, it was so alive with animal sounds. Birds screeched, frogs croaked. There were even some sounds the redhead swore he had never heard before.

“There be her house,” said Somers as the trio trudged through the oozing muck.

The mud and wood hut looked like it had erupted from the earth. Like a giant beaver dam, it blended into the forest so well that Shayne wouldn’t have seen it had it not been pointed out to him.

“Miss Lillie,” Somers yelled, “it’s Reuben Somers. Can I come in?”

After almost no time the door opened slowly, and a tiny, stooped woman in a dark brown robe emerged. Shayne had seen heartier scarecrows. Her gray hair had a strange greenish tinge that made the long strands look almost like vines. Around her neck hung a black polished stone on a piece of leather.

But it was her face that froze the big detective in his tracks. It was dark and rutted almost like the earth itself. Her age? Anywhere between 50 and 150, Shayne guessed.

“Reuben, my son,” she said in a whisper that seemed to magnify in the dampness around them, “please bring Mr. Michael Shayne from Miami into my house.”

Shayne, shoving the still-mute soldier in the door ahead of him, wondered how she knew who he was. He guessed the others had told her.

The interior of the hut totally belied what the redhead had seen from the outside. The room was spacious, cool, and dry. He felt a soft breeze, yet there were no windows. The light from a tiny fire burning in an earthen hearth glowed off the polished walls flooding the room with an eerie luminescence. Shayne had a sudden sense of why Jerry Lee hadn’t been too eager to visit this place.

“The fishing in this resort might be lousy,” said a gruff voice, “but they’ve got a great house physician.”

Sitting on a log bench with leaves growing out of his right shoulder sat Will Gentry.

Around a table on similar benches were the three remaining members of the Somers family.

"Mike," said the police chief as he saw the relief on the redhead's face, "remind me never to play cards with strangers. I'm already down 62 walnuts, and I still can't tell a cup from a sword."

"Miss Lillie's been tellin' our fortunes," said Becky Lou.

"Would you like to see your fate, Michael Shayne?" said the tiny, gray-haired lady.

Before Shayne could answer she flipped over the next card in the Tarot deck. A huge skeleton grinned at the redhead.

Effie Somers gasped, "The death card."

The woman with the large deck looked up at the detective with dark eyes whose color Shayne could not discern in the room's aura. "The grim reaper stands in your path," she pronounced, "but where I do not know."

There was a time in Shayne's life when he had thought that reality consisted solely of what you could touch — fleshy knuckles, cold steel, a warm woman — but since his confrontation with Ho Lu, the Oriental ninja, he had begun to question traditional definitions as much as suspects. Nothing was to be taken for granted.

"Miss Lillie," said Reuben Somers, "we'd like to ask a favor."

"Yes," she smiled softly like a grandmother, "I believe I can talk with your silent friend." The crone gestured at the bound soldier. "I've learned that a body can communicate with anything if you know the language. Now, Reuben, that's no way to treat a guest. Untie him so's he's more at home."

Shayne started to protest, but Somers obeyed without question like an eager-to-please child.

The stooped woman started through a door of trailing plants. Shayne watched in disbelief as the giant in uniform followed her docilely.

The room grew silent. In the midst of the people Shayne felt somehow alone. It was almost as if the clock had stopped and the scene was frozen around him.

In the glow of the fire he surveyed Miss Lillie's home. The wall on one side of the fireplace was lined with shelves on which sat earthen jars in all shapes and sizes. He lifted one up, reached for the top, then put it down again, deciding he didn't really want to know what was inside.

On the other side of the fireplace were piles of dusty books with faded gilt titles. Shayne wet his finger and wiped the dust off the lettering on the top book. It was in a script he had never before seen. He lifted the cover slightly, half-expecting a bat to dart out, and peeked at a page. The writing was unintelligible.

As he turned back to the group still at the table, he heard a guttural scream. Instinctively he bolted toward the doorway through which Miss Lillie had disappeared. His foot caught on the edge of a small table in front of the hearth, and a jar crashed to the dirt floor, spilling a black, viscous fluid.

Continuing to the doorway from where he had heard the scream, Shayne found he couldn't enter. He pushed himself forward, but couldn't go any further. He couldn't explain why, but it was as though some force held him back.

Behind him the door to the house opened. Shayne turned to see Miss Lillie smiling. Her voice leapt toward him like an animal springing. "Mr. Chandler has something he wishes to tell you."

VIII

SHAYNE LED THE OTHERS OUTSIDE. THE REDHEAD, SPOTTING the soldier sitting on a stump with a penitent face, decided the only thing missing from the tableau was a dunce cap.

Miss Lillie, fingering her dark amulet, stepped in front of the glassy-eyed soldier. "Now, Chick," she said softly, "what be it you want to tell these folk?"

Staring at the ground, Chandler began to speak. His tone reminded the redhead of those computerized voices in airport concourses. "Six months ago Mr. Raleigh Bright offered me a job."

"Who is this Raleigh Bright?" said Shayne.

"A lawyer in Atlanta."

"What kinda job?" demanded Somers.

"To train a bunch of his country club friends. They're all convinced that nuclear holocaust is just around the corner and there's no way to head it off. So they wanted to be prepared."

"Retreatists," said Gentry.

"Survivalists is the term Commander Bright uses," said Chandler.

"And you're a professional mercenary," concluded Shayne. "How did a lawyer like Bright contact you?"

"After Nam, me and John Russell decided we liked fighting better than peace. I mean, life's an adventure, not a nine-to-five card-punching, union-card-carrying job. So we placed ads in those soldier

of fortune magazines. We'd just gotten back from Guatemala when Bright flies us in, tells us what he wants, and brings us up here."

Shayne fired up a Camel. He'd have bet a case of Martell that Russell was the soldier he had fought at the lake and those he had coldcocked were members of the country-club set.

Reuben Somers spat in disgust. "You mean to tell me that in a country three-thousand miles wide you just happened to pick a place like Skull Mountain to make camp?"

"Commander Bright said he had access to a secret Pentagon report that projected in the event of a nuclear war the area with the greatest odds of survival was right here."

Shayne had no doubt that World War III would be fought with nuclear weapons and that World War IV would use sticks and stones. This Bright must have wanted an edge. "So," the big detective said, "your job was to train a bunch of wealthy fat cats in the manly art of survival."

"Twice a month," answered Chandler without hesitation, "we'd come out here to a base of operations we've been building."

"I told y'all," said Becky Lou, "I'd seed somebody up on top of Skull Mountain."

Chandler said, "There's a huge cave up there with a very strategic location. 360 degree view of the valley, running water, six-month's provisions, radiation-proof bunker, a copter pad, and before we're done we'll control the only road in and outta here."

Gentry said, "On our way up here, Mike and I didn't drive past any caves."

"You boys musta come in the old loggin' road," said Somers.

"And that's the way we're going out — right now," said Shayne.

"Not," declared the captive, "if Commander Bright has started Operation Closedown."

"What's that?" said the redhead.

"When we realized we couldn't scare these rubes outta here, the Commander decided we might have to terminate them with extreme prejudice."

"I don't like the sound of that," said Somers.

"You shouldn't," advised Shayne. "It's an old military expression for killing without mercy."

The redhead heard a multiple gasp from behind him.

"We haven't got much time," said Shayne.

"Nobody takes land from the Somers," said the old man.

"We'll deal with these survivalists later," said Shayne. "Right now we need to get your family and my friend out of these woods."

"Shamus," growled Gentry.

"I won't leave you, Reuben," said his beautiful wife putting her arms around her husband.

"Shayne's got a point, hon," he said. "All you git your tails in the back of the truck."

While they scrambled aboard, Somers turned to the small woman who stood impassively in the midst of the hurricane. "Miss Lillie, you comin'?"

"Don't allows as I will," she said. "Got nuthin' to fear from nobody long as I stays here."

Somers turned to Shayne. "Ain't no use in arguin' with Miss Lillie."

"What about Chandler?" said the redhead.

Miss Lillie answered softly, "The nice boy has volunteered to keep me company. 'Sides, he's got somebody he's just dyin' to meet."

Somers climbed in the cab, and the redhead got in beside him. As the mountain man turned over the 427, the big detective said, "My guess is that she hypnotized our soldier of ill-fortune."

"That's as good an explanation as I can give you. Truth is nobody knows much 'bout Miss Lillie, 'cept that she's been on this mountain longer than old Seth Toomey can remember. He's 110," said Somers, "if he be a day."

THE FORD WOUND AROUND THE MOUNTAINSIDE'S TRACK OF narrow dirt road punctuated at intervals by rotted cross-logs for traction.

Shayne said, "If a woman tried to live like Miss Lillie in Miami, she'd be mugged and her house ransacked once a week. Don't you feel uneasy leaving her?"

Somers shifted down. "Folks round here learned long ago that Miss Lillie's like the land — people come and go, but the land endures."

"So she's lived alone all these years?" said the detective.

"Some say she used to live with a man, but nobody's really clear. They claim her son — some say her husband — deserted the Army of the South when Sherman marched through. Miss Lillie hid him in the swamp. Some say she made a pact with the Devil to keep him from bein' discovered."

"The Civil War was over a century ago," said Shayne, the disbelief creeping back into his voice. "You sure that's not some local legend

to help drum up tourist trade?"

Somers said, "First, folk 'round here don't want no tourists, and second, 'round here we don't question what's not our'n to question."

Normally the big redhead would have been totally cynical about such a story, and on this one he had doubts, but Somers' voice had such a sincerity that said, "These are my roots. They may be different, they may be strange, but they are mine."

"Hellfire and damnation," said the driver, slamming on the brakes. "We ain't gettin' out the way you came in."

Shayne looked through the dirt-covered windshield. Just where the road dipped between two ridges, it had been blocked. Somebody had felled two mammoth trees across the road forming an impenetrable barrier.

Operation Closedown had started.

IX

ON THE RIDE BACK TO MISS LILLIE'S, WHICH THEY HAD determined was now the safest place to hide out, Reuben Somers stopped the pickup at a fork in the road.

"This path winds up the mountain past the caves," said the redhead's new ally. "It's the only other way outta here like that Chandler fella said. You sure you want to do this?"

"No choice," said the redhead, checking his .38. "You've got to protect the people in back."

"One thing," said Somers. "It's nigh on dusk. Once you've scouted 'round up there, you foller this here road back to Miss Lillie's. No matter what, you don't try no shortcut through the swamp."

"You sound pretty definite about that," said Shayne.

"I am."

"Why not go there?" pressed Shayne. "Quicksand? Rattlers?"

"There's something down there in that swamp, and it's worse than any quicksand or snake."

"What?"

"Just a thing. Folk call it The Swampster. Supposed to look like a big bear 'cept it's covered with mud and vines and things."

The redhead had accepted a lot of the local lore, but a swamp monster was a little too much. Maybe Reuben Somers had been breathing that swamp gas too long.

As Shayne got out of the cab, Will Gentry called, "Shamus, I'm going too. It's my bacon in the fire." He stood up and took a step. Jerry Lee caught him as he collapsed.

"You take care of these people, Will," said the redhead. "You've been in enough tight spots to know how."

Shayne started up the path.

"Now you mind what I say," called Somers, "about that there swamp."

SHAYNE FELT CRAMPED. FOR THE PAST HOUR HE HAD BEEN wedged between two rotting logs, and while he watched the eight soldiers scurrying below, an army of carpenter ants crawled over him. He flicked them off as fast as their manacles sunk in, trying to concentrate on the activity below. All they had been doing was carrying boxes into the bush-camouflaged mouth of the cave Becky Lou had mentioned.

It seemed the perfect scenario for a survivalist group. Locate, secure, store, and protect. One man stood by the entrance to the cave with a clipboard. Giving directions, he was tall, mustached, and wearing a one-piece, green flightsuit. Raleigh Bright, no doubt.

Shayne decided to crawl closer to hear what they were saying. As he slithered across the pine needles, he spotted the solitary sentry. With a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a tripod, he was the final door in Operation Closedown.

"You seen Chandler yet?" Bright called to the sentry.

"No, sir," answered the guard. "Do you think the hicks got him?"

"Hawkins and Bryant who went with him could get lost on The Club's golf course, Jenkins. Why do you think we had to go outside The Cadre to hire Chandler and Russell? They're supposed to know what they're doing."

The sentry said, "Do you think those shots this morning meant anything?"

Bright stuck a large cigar in his cheek and lit up. "Probably that our two tough guys stumbled across a covey of quail."

"The only quail Chandler's after," said Jenkins, "has blonde hair and wears cut-off-shorts."

While they had been talking, Shayne had worked his way behind a stack of boxes at the cave's mouth. He could feel the tension. Without their squad leaders, the two he had taken out, these amateurs might go berserk at the slightest provocation, and a 12-gauge and a .22 were no match for a .50 caliber.

The light had just about disappeared as Bright called out, "Mess time."

Slowly the cave emptied. Shayne looked at the untanned faces passing by. They reminded him of the two he had coldcocked. He had a feeling they were better suited for the board room than the field tent.

One soldier popped the top of his olive-drab can and started spooning out the contents. "Hey, Raleigh," he called, "do you have any filet mignon in those boxes we carried in?"

"That's Commander Bright when we're in the field, Hargrove. And what did you expect, Pitty Pat's Porch to cater?"

"Hey, Raleigh . . . Commander," called another, "when are we going to finish up tomorrow. If we hurry up, I can still get nine holes in."

"Tomorrow, men, at dawn," said Bright, "Chandler and Russell will be back, and then we're going to put the fear of God in these local yokels."

"Shit, Raleigh," said another, "I believe in The Cadre. I mean, I'm not on a big retainer from Pacific Petroleum like you, but I still plunked down my ten K to get this operation rolling. Still, when we started, you didn't say anything about shooting and terrorizing civilians."

Bright stood up and threw his coffee into the brush in disgust. "Hell, Rankin, you've seen those locals sneaking around here. What do you think would happen to that Bentley of yours if you left it parked on a sidestreet near the Omni overnight?"

"Well, I . . ."

"That's right. You've got a better chance of shooting par than you do of finding it in one piece."

"'Nuff said, Commander," admitted the soldier as he spilled his field rations.

SHAYNE FOUND A FEW LIGHTS STILL ON IN THE CAVE. MAYBE he could locate something to help him even the odds. The interior was amazing. Beneath fluorescent grow lights he found vegetables. Somewhere back in the cave he heard running water — probably an underground spring. Supplemented by the right rations, the place could be self-sustaining for a long time. Down a side cave he saw rows of beds, enough for fifty people, which was probably what The Cadre's families numbered. A reading room. Sophisticated communications equipment. A bathroom. They were ready for World War III all right.

Finally he discovered the arms room and what he had hoped to find. Stenciled on the side of a wooden packing crate was GRENADES — FRAGMENTARY. He found a screwdriver and pried the top off.

The redhead was completely surprised by what he saw. The box was filled with nothing but newspapers and rocks.

Without warning war erupted outside the cave. The .50 caliber chattered in the night through hot teeth.

"It's Hawkins and Bryant," someone yelled faintly.

"Stop firing, you asshole," said another. "It's ours."

"The hicks got help," said one of the returning figures. "They killed Russell and captured Chandler."

Shayne could sense the panic, knew he had to get out of jeopardy immediately.

He scrambled to the mouth of the cave and headed toward the cover of the awaiting boxes.

The click was loud. He turned enough to see Bright. Levelled between the redhead's eyes was a .45 automatic.

X

SHAYNE SAT IN THE DARKNESS. HIS HANDS HAD BEEN bound, and he had been tied to a tall pine. A war council was going on. The glow of a cigar appeared in front of him.

"That him?" said Bright.

The figure Shayne remembered having knocked out at Somers' cabin nodded. "Yeah, he was with that rube."

"O.K., mister," said Bright, "you don't look like one of the locals. Who are you and what are you doing on Skull Mountain?"

"Would you believe I'm a desperate Electrolux salesman trying to meet my October quota?" said Shayne.

The back of Bright's hand slapped the big detective's face.

"George C. Scott did a better imitation of Patton than you, pal," said the redhead.

"This is getting bigger than we bargained for," said a man smoking a pipe.

"Yeah," said another, "how do we know he's not with the government or something?"

Remembering something that Chandler had said, Shayne tried a bluff. "O.K., you guys, this has gone far enough. I'll have to level with you. It's my duty to inform you that I'm working out of the Defense Intelligence Agency. It seems that a certain survivalist group in Atlanta illegally accessed the Pentagon computers about geographical survival projections."

"Holy shit, Raleigh," said somebody, "I thought you said nobody was going to find out."

"Shut up," said Bright, removing Shayne's wallet and searching its contents.

"If he isn't DIA," said one, "how'd he know about that Pentagon study?"

"He's feeding you bullshit," said the commander. "It says here he's a private investigator out of Miami."

"Sure," said the redhead, "I'm a P.I. out of Miami who just happened into Nowheresville, Georgia, and I just happened to run into The Cadre, and I just happened . . ."

"I don't know about you guys," said a voice Shayne recognized as Rankin, "but I'm taking one of the jeeps and pulling out."

Bright drew his .45. "Nobody's going anywhere except over to that fire where we're going to decide what to do about this new intelligence."

Shayne found himself alone. He could hear the discord of dissension, but above all rode the strident voice of Raleigh Bright. The big detective sensed there was something really wrong here, something he had seen dimly in the distance that was now starting to take shape, and he didn't like the outline he saw materializing.

Suddenly somebody reached around his neck from behind. A blackened blade still caught a glimmer of firelight.

"Don't make a sound," said a voice. "Don't look. I'm going to cut you loose. Give me enough time to get back to the campfire, then blast off and get those poor rubes out of here. I don't want their deaths on my conscience."

Shayne recognized the voice as that of the man called Rankin. He waited a few minutes and then began to crawl away.

From behind him he heard a shout, "The bushes. Somebody's in the bushes."

The machine gun opened up, sending a steel hailstorm in Shayne's direction. The detective flattened vertically against a fat tree. When the burst stopped, he broke behind the curve of the hill.

A second burst exploded well over his head.

"That government guy's gone," shouted someone. "Get in the jeeps. We'll head him off."

Shayne loped down the mountainside trying to stay clear of the shafts of moonlight that intermittently hurled themselves through the trees. As he reached the dirt road, man-made light sought him out. Realizing he could never outrun the jeeps from the road, he did what he had promised Reuben Somers he wouldn't.

His only haven was the mist-covered swamp.

WHEN THE REDHEAD REACHED THE FORBIDDEN AREA, HE knew it immediately. The soft muck gave under his weight. It was harder moving through the ankle-deep water and oozing subsurface than on his early-morning jogs down Miami's beaches.

Shayne's nostrils burned with the sulfurous smell of marsh gas. His ears were assaulted by shrill night sounds. And, as if he had stepped into another dimension, the lights and shouts of his pursuers had disappeared. Dead tree stumps rose up from the water like stubby fingers grasping for him.

Keeping his bearings was impossible. One gray log looked like another. The thick mist and the broken moonlight kept him from seeing more than a few feet ahead. The heavy air caused his breathing to be labored. He was barely moving through a claustrophobic's nightmare.

He stumbled, pitched forward, and splashed into some weeds. While they grappled with his legs, glimmering eyes stared across the water line at him, and he knew he didn't want to know to what they were attached.

Shayne struggled to his feet. The swamp had closed in around him. Every direction looked the same. The needle on the compass built into his head spun wildly.

He was lost.

A strange feeling, one alien to him, was born in his gut, and he found his breathing uneven. No matter how bad the situation had been in the past, the big detective had always felt at least a measure of control, but here he stood — helpless, confused — fearful.

The high ground. When in doubt, get to the high ground, a voice whispered in the back of his head.

But where in a swamp was the high ground?

To his right a small mound rose from the water around a good-sized scrub pine that still had some needles. That was what he needed. He took a few quick steps and using a pine branch pulled himself up.

From their vantage point he could get some idea as to what direction to head in. At least on this pitcher's-mound hammock he wasn't standing knee-deep in the mire.

The hiss wasn't from any one side — it was all around him. Like the air being let out of fifty tires, he was surrounded. His haven had turned out to be a nest of squirming, restless serpents.

The moon broke from behind a dark cloud, and he saw thirty or

forty water moccasins writhing around, their rest disturbed.

Above him an slightly ahead, he spotted a huge limb. It would be a helluva leap, and if he missed, he would surely sprawl headlong into the midst of crawling death.

Hell, what other chance did he have!

He leapt.

His right hand grasped the branch firmly, but his left slipped off the shaggy bark. He strained. Slowly he pulled himself up.

Quickly he climbed the short pine. As he got higher, the tree bent under his weight until gently it let him down in the swamp water.

He had no time for elation. He was exhausted and disoriented. He leaned against a dead tree. Just to sleep for a few minutes, a little rest.

He closed his eyes. The water seeping in his fishing boots felt warm. He listened. The swamp was perfectly still. Where were the frogs, the peepers?

Slurp.

In the distance he heard it.

Slurp.

A sound like a giant foot stepping in mud and then pulling loose.

Slurp.

He ran the catalog of swamp creatures, their sounds through his mind. Nothing.

Slurp.

It was closer.

A rotted limb cracked. Water splashed. Something was torn loose.

Slurp.

It was straight ahead. Shayne decided to retreat. He pivoted fast and started forward.

He never saw the limb.

It clotheslined him, dropping him like a Ted Hendrick's forearm. The murky water embraced him. He looked up through dazed, wet eyes.

The world swam.

Slurp.

He would have sworn he saw the very swamp itself moving. It was the size of a grizzly, but it was covered with mud and vines.

Slurp.

Shayne blacked out.

XI

THE BRIGHT LIGHT BLINDED SHAYNE. HE BLINKED HIS EYES.

The sun perched on the top of the pines stared him in the face.

He rubbed his eyes. About ten yards ahead was the back of Miss Lillies's hut. He stared at the mud and vine-covered structure. It must have been what he had seen last night in his dazed condition. Somehow he had stumbled through the swamp and made it to her home. What other explanation could there be?

The redhead looked at his jeans and jacket. They were covered with dried mud.

Hearing voices, he pulled himself to his feet and started forward. Had The Cadre already attacked the Somers? In the small of his back he found his .38 was missing. Of course, they had taken it the night before.

Shayne rounded the corner of the house. Standing in front was the Somers clan, Will Gentry, Miss Lillie, and four men dressed in overalls he had never seen before. They were all carrying rifles.

"Shamus," said Gentry, "when you didn't come back, we thought... what happened to you?"

Miss Lillie offered her enigmatic smile. "Been 'spectin' you, Mr. Michael Shayne. Did you find the swamp hospitable last night?"

Somehow the redhead got the feeling the crone knew more than she was saying, but before he could answer, Becky Lou spoke up.

"Ain't it wunnerful? Those bad men didn't git my Bucky after all. He showed up here late last night. Strange, too," she added, taking the hand of a young stranger with a patch over one eye, "he had thet mud all over his body jest like you."

"Young Bucksaw," interjected Miss Lillie, "don't remember a dadblame thing."

Reuben Somers spoke up. "Shayne, you're jest in time to join the Wynters and me on an old-fashioned skunk hunt."

Becky Lou, unable to contain the glee, said, "Gonna be a weddin' soon, and after a hundred years of Somers fighting Wynters, there gonna be peace on Skull Mountain."

"Me and Becky Lou," said Buck Wynters, "are gonna have a baby. Join the bloodlines, so to speak."

"Ain't gonna be no weddin' and no peace," said a man Shayne decided must be Cy Wynters, "lessen we drive them outsiders off our mountain."

Reuben Somers painted a nearby rock with tobacco juice. "We're goin' up to the top of the mountain to bag us some varmints. You with

us?"

Through the dizziness that engulfed him, the redhead said, "First of all, a few rifles are no match for the sophisticated arsenal they've got up there, and second, I think I've put a few things together."

"Time for talk's past," said Reuben Somers. "Let's git."

The six men crossed Miss Lillie's bridge and started toward the cave on foot.

"I tried to stop them," said Gentry. "They're too bull-headed."

"Like a certain police chief I know," said Shayne. "I've got to stop them. Things aren't what they think. Come on."

The big detective started toward the bridge and collapsed. His body was tired, a prison of pain that wouldn't do his bidding.

Miss Lillie shambled up to him with a gourd of liquid. "Drink this," she said softly. "You'll feel better. I guarantee it."

It looked like a bowl of soup served in a greasy-spoon diner, but Shayne put it to his lips anyway. As he drank, the gray-haired crone reached out and touched him with her dark amulet.

AS THOUGH HE HAD STUCK HIS FINGER IN AN OUTLET, ELECTRICITY surged through the rangy redhead. If she bottled the stuff, he thought, the Dolphins would pay a million dollars to have it available in the fourth quarter.

"Dear Reuben left his truck over there," she pointed.

Shayne and Gentry crossed the bridge in a hurry and got in. The redhead fired up the black truck and headed for the road up the mountain. With the carburetors wide open the 427 roared like a 747 jet engine. The jolts from the rutted road sent spasms of pain through Gentry's injured shoulder, but he just gritted his teeth.

Gunfire erupted above them. Shayne downshifted as the incline rose and pressed the accelerator to the floor.

"Just like lambs to the slaughter," said the redhead, "and they've all been duped."

"What do you know, Shamus?" said Gentry.

"Take off what's left of that white shirt of yours, Will."

"You're not going to try to run up a white flag. You'd have more luck trying it in the Sinai."

"Maybe it's a slim chance, but it's the only chance."

The firefight raged on the east side of Skull Mountain. The gunfire covering their arrival, Shayne took the Ford off the road and circled west. He doubted that with their inexperience The Cadre would cover

their rear.

He stopped the truck on the same bluff from which he had observed the soldiers the night before. From his vantage point he could see that one of the Wynters boys lay silent and a member of The Cadre rolled in agony while holding his left leg.

"Hit the horn, Will," shouted Shayne.

The combination of the blare and the detective waving his makeshift flag — Will Gentry's torn shirt tied to the .22 — caught everyone's attention. The firing stopped.

"Before you two armies annihilate each other," Shayne shouted, the sharp edge of sarcasm cutting the morning air, "there's something you ought to know."

Maybe it was the shock of the solitary man on the bluff, but nobody fired.

"Reuben," said the redhead, "when your visitors hear what I've got to say, I don't think you'll have to throw them off your mountain." He turned. "You country-club soldiers have gone to war under false pretenses."

Bright raised his .45. "I should have killed you last night."

"Let him talk, Raleigh," said a member of his squad.

"Rankin," said the rawboned redhead, "take a man into your cave and bring out one of those crates of grenades."

While they waited, Shayne from his high point could hear all sorts of rumblings. After awhile Rankin and another man appeared.

"Set that crate down," said Shayne, "and give every man on both sides a 'grenade.'"

Puzzled, the soldiers pried open the box.

"What the hell?" Rankin said, lifting out some newspapers and rocks.

The stuff of World War IV, thought Shayne as he said, "Who was in charge of supplies?"

"Raleigh," said a soldier. "He collected our money and bought everything."

"If you'll check in the cave," said Shayne, "you'll find one of the great rock and paper collections in the Western World."

Bright yelled, "If you men don't shoot him, I will." He pointed his automatic.

"Drop it, Raleigh," said Jenkins as he whirled the .50 caliber toward the commander. "We're going to hear this out to the end."

"Rankin," said Shayne, "how long ago was The Cadre formed?"

"Almost six months ago to the day. Raleigh said he had just gotten hold of a secret Pentagon report on potential survival in the case of nuclear war."

Shayne yelled down the mountain, "Reuben, have you ever seen Commander Bright before?"

"Sure have," said the bearded man. "Drivin' that silver Mercedes up to my doorstep."

"How long ago was that?" said Shayne.

"Little over two years ago."

Rankin said, "Raleigh, you tried to sell me that 350SL last spring. You don't drive it any more. Tell me, how could this guy know about it?"

As Bright stood silently, several soldiers emerged with more boxes.

"Damned if that redheaded guy's not right," said one.

"Every box," said another, "is filled with only papers and rocks."

"What's going on?" came the voice of an angry soldier.

"Commander Bright," said Shayne, "was more interested in his own survival than in helping some concerned friends ride out the next world war. Reuben," the redhead yelled, "didn't you tell me that Fire Lake used to be a good fishing hole till about ten years ago?"

"Yeah, fish died out after that quake we had a decade back."

"That water color," said Shayne, "that smell remind you of anything? When I was at Miss Lillie's, I noticed one of the jars in her collection was filled with a thick, black liquid. Rankin, what does Bright do for a living?"

"He's a lawyer. Works for a lot of people."

"But," said Shayne, "you mentioned last night a particular West Coast client."

"Pacific Petroleum," said Rankin.

Shayne rasped his thumbnail across the stubble on his chin. "Bright got hold of some secret reports, all right, but I'd guess the strangers that Somers saw before Bright arrived weren't from the Pentagon. They were geologists."

"So," concluded Rankin, "Raleigh got an advance tip, and two years ago he tried to buy the land. When that didn't work, he formed The Cadre, using us to terrorize the local people into selling."

"And when they finally sold out," said Shayne, "guess whose money he was going to use to buy the land?"

"Damn you, Raleigh," said Rankin, stepping toward his former leader.

Suddenly the exposed lawyer grabbed Rankin around the neck and stuck the .45 to his head. "Nobody moves," he warned. "We're getting out of here."

Slowly Bright backed Rankin to a jeep and got in. Then, starting it up, he kicked the soldier out and spun the tires, spitting a cloud of dust behind him.

Whether it was a surprise or the fact that none of them was a killer, nobody fired.

Shayne jumped in the truck where Gentry was still sitting and skidded off after Bright. He paused momentarily to let Reuben Somers jump in the bed. The redhead careened down the hill, but he had to drive slower than he wanted because the dust obscured the road.

"I guess I was wrong," said the crusty cop. "Somebody does need our help, and you know what? It feels good."

They reached the bottom of the hill where the road bordered the swamp. As the dust cloud floated away, Shayne noticed the jeep ahead.

It was lying on its side off the road, and a black liquid trickled down from the oil pan into the muck. Shayne, Somers, and Gentry jumped out of the truck.

"Where's Bright?" said the police chief.

The commander was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly from the mist-covered swamp below issued a shrill scream.

"Sounds like either the snakes or quicksand got him," said Gentry.

Reuben Somers looked at Shayne. He didn't have to say a thing.

THE FRAIL, GRAY-HAIRED WOMAN STOOD BESIDE THE DARK pool.

Suddenly the brackish water parted, and a body coated with a thick, dark liquid bobbed to the surface. His mouth agape and his eyes still wide open, his face wore a black mask of horror.

"Looks like Mr. Raleigh Bright won't be troublin' folk 'round here no more," she said, turning to a figure in the shadows. "Like the good book says, 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth' — the blessed earth — 'abideth forever.'"

Reaching out she took into her tiny fingers a huge, mud-covered paw. "Come on," she said, "we can go home now."

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He'd killed last year and gotten away with it. This year another hooker ended her career with a .32 slug in her head. Lucky Lew Ritter swore the killer wouldn't get away with it this time!

The People's Defender

by BEN SATTERFIELD

Prologue

MOVING SLOWLY DOWN THE DESERTED STREET, THE BLACK Mercedes sedan seemed lost and out of place. In the back seat, a man wearing a custom-made suit of gray pinstriped silk checked his watch and turned the ring on his third finger. The ring was a simple gold band; the watch was a Rado Golden DiaStar.

The car pulled off the street and parked in front of a pay telephone

by an all-night grocery. The man got out of the car and entered the telephone booth, leaving the aluminum and glass door open so that the light remained off. At 1:10 a.m., the phone rang and he lifted the receiver at once. "Benjamin," he said, and closed the door.

On the other end of the line a United States Senator spoke calmly. "I hear you have a problem."

"Well," Benjamin answered, "it's more of an inconvenience, really."

"But the kind of person involved is so unreliable, so unpredictable that he could create difficulties."

"We'll take care —"

"Let's work this to our advantage," the senator said evenly. "Don't do anything that might draw attention away from him. Let him take the heat."

"All four burners?"

"On," the senator said. "And remember."

"Of course." Absently turning the wedding band, Benjamin smiled and repeated, "To our advantage."

ALTHOUGH RITTER GRABBED THE TELEPHONE AFTER THE first ring, it woke her and she rolled over in bed next to him. "Yeah," he growled into the mouthpiece.

"Lew? This is Mac."

"I didn't leave a wake-up call."

"Heh, heh. Public servants never rest, eternal vigilance and all that."

Ritter turned on a dome lamp above the headboard and a red 25 watt bulb inside coated the bedroom with a warm crimson light soft as velvet — a carnal glow, Monica called it. He looked at the clock on the nightstand by the telephone. "It's 4 a.m., Mac, whatta you want?"

"I want you to see something. I've got a body in the Westgate Mall parking lot."

"And I've got one here, nice and warm."

"Come on out, Lew. Narcotics on this one." He paused. "Big."

The magic word.

"Okay, I'll be right there." He laid the phone back in its cradle. Monica put an arm around him and snuggled close. "I've got to go," he said.

"Damn."

"With luck I'll be back for breakfast."

"I'll stay. I'm too sleepy to go home anyway."

"Good girl." He kissed her forehead and got out of bed. They had smoked some Oaxacan a few hours earlier and the room was stale with the lingering odor. It was prime weed, and they had made love slowly and sensuously for two hours before wafting into a languorous dreamful sleep. The last thing Ritter remembered was a panoramic vision of a mountain range and a huge sky, of which he was part. It made him happy to be so perfectly in nature.

He dressed, putting on the same suit he had worn the night before, and went into the kitchen. From an airtight canister he removed a small plastic bag of white powder into which he dipped a tiny golden spoon. He held his left nostril closed as he lifted the spoon to his right and sniffed quickly. Then he dipped the spoon again and held it to his left nostril. He snuffled a few times, then rubbed his nose and replaced the cocaine in the canister marked *Baking Powder* and put it back on the shelf.

He strapped his Colt Python to his belt and left the house whistling the tune to "Gonna Hit the Highway."

WHEN HE PULLED INTO THE SHOPPING CENTER PARKING LOT he saw at the far side next to a drainage ditch a patrol car slinging red and blue light in hysterical circles, a morgue wagon, and McIntyre's dark Ford, all parked around a red Eagle sedan with the driver's door open and the interior lights on. Two uniformed patrolmen were talking with the morgue attendants, one of whom was smoking a cigarette with quick jerky motions.

McIntyre leaned against his car and scribbled in a notebook.

"Sleeping Beauty," he said by way of greeting. McIntyre was not quite as tall as Ritter but he was thicker and outweighed him by twenty pounds. He had a face that showed the effects of too much booze and too little sleep. Sagging half circles of gray flesh underlined his bloodshot eyes, and his nose was matted with visible capillaries. His hair was the color of ashes and looked about as lifeless. He scratched his crotch and smiled. "Did I mess up your love life?"

"You could never do that. I'm so good the women are standing in line. I was up to number seven when you called."

"Meet number eight." Mac handed him a driver's license and held a pocket flashlight above it. Ritter looked at the picture of a pretty blonde who was 29 years old, green-eyed, 6'1" and a resident of the city. Her name was LeAnn Hanson.

"Familiar?" Mac asked.

"Huh-uh. Should I know her?"

"Yeah, she was Max Cosso's broad."

Ritter looked around. "Where are the media people? They working regular hours now?"

"Bunch of damn bureaucrats," Mac snorted. "Desk huggers. It's not like the old days."

Ritter handed back the license and walked over to the Eagle. The key was in the ignition, and on a ring attached to it hung two others, one of which appeared to be a housekey, and a leather tag about four inches long with the initials LAH carved in it like a brand. LeAnn Hanson was on the passenger side of the front seat, head slumped against the window, a bullet hole in the left temple. She was wearing espadrilles, no hose, a khaki skirt and blouse, a cableknit white sweater with wooden buttons, a gold wrist watch, and two rings with large emerald settings. Her mouth and eyes were half open in that totally relaxed attitude of corpses. Emptied of vanity and caring the body had turned loose completely, and since death shows no favoritism or concern for beauty, Ritter knew that her bowels had been no exception. A thin line of blood ran from the canthus of her left eye into the larger stream from the bullet wound. Dark and congealed, the drying blood from the black hole contrasted with the bright blonde hair like emblems of good and evil. "Ugly," Ritter said. He could see that the head was already beginning to swell from the fluid of the ruptured brain; in another few hours it would be the size of a volleyball and the color of a giant bruise.

"You shoulda been here earlier," Mac answered. "Was a young patrolman, took one look and chucked his tamales. There he was with his ass in the air like a Moslem at prayer time, puking his guts out in the ditch."

"I wish I could," Ritter said.

"We're old hands," Mac said, sticking his little finger in his ear and working it around.

"You said narcotics."

"So I did." Mac looked at his little finger, then rubbed the nail several times with his thumb. "There's a half a pound of smack under the front seat," he said casually. "Thought you'd like to know."

Ritter turned back to the Eagle.

"Don't mess with it. The lab boys're still waking up. Take my word, I checked it, it's not baking powder."

Ritter stopped, then smiled to himself. "Did you look in the trunk too?"

"Does Easter come in the spring?"

"Nothing there, huh?"

"All I've seen so far is under the front seat. I don't know how good it is, but half a pound is what I'd call serious."

"Can you make it out?"

"Can't you? I figure it for a drug kill."

"Some kind of rip-off?"

Mac shrugged. "The car's registered to Cosso, could be she was dealing for him, trying to make bail money or something."

Ritter shook his head. "The judge denied bail. You remember, a cop was killed when I busted him."

"Could be she's handling things now."

"Maybe, but why take her out — and leave half a pound of skag under the seat?"

"Whoever did it probably didn't know it was there."

"You're thinking there might've been more?"

"Could be."

"She must've had a purse," Ritter said.

"Yeah, a small one. It's on the seat on the other side of her. Nothing unusual in it though."

"How long do you figure she's been dead?"

"Little over an hour." Mac flipped the notebook shut and put it in his inside coat pocket. "Patrol car found her just about an hour ago, and she was still warm. The engine too."

"So she met someone here, say, at 3 a.m. Odd time for a meet." He rubbed his chin. "And why here?"

"Well, it's open territory, no one could sneak up without being seen."

"Which means it was someone she knew."

"Why're you assuming she was whacked out right here? The body's on the passenger side, she coulda been dusted on the freeway or anywhere and ditched here."

"I don't think so. Her head's against the window, highly visible, and even at 3 a.m. anyone driving around would've shoved her out of sight."

Mac shrugged.

"Whereas someone who fired right here would be anxious to get away, so he probably just shot and ran."

"Ran?"

"Took off, I mean."

"Which is what I wanta do, but I gotta wait for the M.E. and the lab team." He yawned, then shook his head and cursed. "Why do these things always happen on Sunday morning?"

"Would Thursday be better?"

"You know what I mean."

"There's no good time to die," Ritter said.

SINCE HE WAS WIDE AWAKE AND IT WAS TOO EARLY FOR Monica to rise, Ritter went to the station and cleared his office of stacked-up paperwork. After three hours his desk was clean and he felt good. The sun was up and so was he.

For a while he listened to the radio, but turned it off when Kris Kristofferson started singing "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down" — put on by a disc jockey with no sense of irony. He walked downstairs to the police laboratory and went through the contents of LeAnn Hanson's purse. Lipsticks, a monogrammed calfskin wallet, two ballpoint pens, a checkbook showing a balance of \$800, compact, nail file, barrette, a packet of tissues, comb, brush, two local theatre ticket stubs, an unused book of matches from The Hideaway with a telephone number written inside, a folder of postage stamps, an Egyptian ankh on a delicate gold chain, several blonde hairpins, four Midol tablets wrapped in a piece of tinfoil, and a portion of an envelope with a return address in Fort Worth on it. The wallet contained eighty dollars and ninety-one cents, driving license, social security card, panels of snapshots and graduation pictures, seven credit cards, a blue button, and a rent receipt for a local apartment. He jotted down the address in his notebook, then copied the number from the pack of matches, a number that looked familiar to him.

Returning home at nine o'clock, he found Monica wearing a red peignoir and sitting in his overstuffed chair with her legs folded in the seat. She was drinking a cup of coffee and reading. "Welcome back, crimefighter." She laid the book on the arm of the chair. "What's the *tsuris du jour*?"

"Murder." He took off his coat and unhooked the Python.

"Tell me more."

"A young woman tall as I am with half a pound of doojee under her front seat was shot in a parking lot. Body discovered about three-thirty by a couple of patrolmen getting ready to coop."

“Coop?”

“Yeah. They find a quiet out-of-the-way place to hide the car in — a coop, it’s called — and then they go to sleep. I think these guys were heading for the loading area behind Penney’s when they saw the car and found the body. Of course they said they were doing a routine check.”

“Of course. It *is* Homicide’s case?”

“The dope makes it my concern too, but the truth is, McIntyre doesn’t know where to start. He called me because he loves to shake me out of bed in the middle of the night, and because he needs help — but he pretends to be doing me a favor.”

Monica shook her head. “So much duplicity.”

“No more than any other job. It’s all game-playing.”

“Why do you do it?”

“It suits me.”

“You like dealing with murderers and dope addicts, hookers and pushers?”

“I said it suits me. Sometimes I hate it, some days seem harder and longer than a round trip to hell, but it’s better than most jobs. At least when I wake up in the morning I know that no matter what happens it won’t be a Xerox copy of yesterday.” He wanted to change the subject. “What’re you reading?”

“One of your books. Written by a man appropriately named Grim.”

Ritter looked at the works by Kirk, Soderman, Grim, and Sutherland on bloodstains, fingerprints, tire marks on corpses, etc. that she had stacked on the coffee table. “These are old,” he said vaguely. Changing the subject wasn’t going to be smooth.

“I’m learning about your work. One of the books even has charts showing the pattern of buckshot on bodies in relation to the distance from — ”

“Monica.”

They looked at each other for a few moments, then he smiled and tried to shrug it off. “Let’s have breakfast.”

She stood up and started to the kitchen. “I learned a lot. For instance, I know that a .45 caliber service pistol has a muzzle velocity of 800 fps — although I’m not sure exactly what that means.”

Ritter put a John Coltrane record on the turntable. “It means that the bullet is traveling at 800 feet per second as it leaves the barrel. Why’re you interested?”

“I just want to know more about you.”

"My work is not me." He gathered the books and put them in the bookcase behind his leather lounging chair. After scanning two rows, he selected another book and took it into the Delft blue-tiled kitchen and handed it to her. "But if you're determined to read, don't begin with the specifics, start with the general. You need an outline to keep those details in perspective."

"*Big-City Police*," Monica read the title.

"It's an Urban Institute study," Ritter said, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "It'll give you a good overview, and it's fairly recent."

"Objective?"

Ritter nodded.

"Okay." She put the book on the kitchen table and tied an apron around her waist. "What say a cheese omelet and toast?"

"Terrific." He opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of champagne. "And after breakfast we can go back to bed."

"Sleepy?"

"Not a bit."

BUT HE DID SLEEP, AND WHEN HE AWOKE AT 5 P.M. MONICA was gone. The champagne had been good, but its effects — and their lovemaking — had left Ritter in a sweet lassitude that invited slumber.

He put on a robe and plodded into the kitchen. Monica's note was on the table.

Thanks for the memories.

There's coffee in the thermos.

P.S.

Let me know about Wed. night.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and read the note again, trying to remember what they had discussed about Wednesday night. He'd have to play it by ear, he decided, after drawing a blank.

He fixed a sandwich, finished the thermos of coffee, then showered and put on a fresh suit. Humming the tune to "Ain't She Sweet," he checked the telephone number in his notebook against his file of numbers, matching it quickly. He dialed. No answer.

"Well," he said aloud, "I guess I'll go to work."

THERE WAS NO POINT IN CHECKING THE APARTMENT WHERE LeAnn Hanson had lived because McIntyre or some of the Homicide detectives would have already scraped the place by now, so Ritter

drove across town to a flesh bar called Dynamite's. In no hurry, he got a run-down on the five cars — all clean — in the parking lot before he went into the bar. Just inside the door he paused a few moments to let his eyes adjust to the darkness and give the bartender ample time to make him, then he casually walked past the few customers at the bar and entered a door marked *Private*. He strolled down a narrow hall, stopping outside a door with a huge gold star emblazoned on it. He knocked, and a female voice answered, "Yeah?"

He opened the door. "Hello, Fleur," he said.

The woman glanced at him, then looked back at the mirror and continued applying her make-up. She wore a chatoyant silk dressing gown over G-string and halter. Her legs, thanks to a life of dancing, belied the fact that she was close to forty, but her face was more of a tribute to cosmetic skill than nature. "It's Bambi nowadays," she said, working on her eyes.

"Bambi," Ritter said, nodding. He closed the door and leaned against the wall next to it. "I still remember Geraldine."

"Long time ago." The woman gave him an exaggerated, theatrical shrug. "I'm a lot of diff'rent people, and diff'rent people have diff'rent names."

"You're looking good, Bambi."

She brushed more of the blue eye shadow on her lids, then flicked a speck from her cheek with a turquoise fingernail that was an inch long. "Thanks. That's nice to hear 'cause ev'ry week I put on more paint. Pretty soon I'll buy it by the gallon — which shows how much help I need."

"I need some help too."

"Uh-oh."

"No trouble, just talk."

"What about?"

"LeAnn Hanson. And use the past tense. Somebody put a hole in her head early this morning."

"What makes you think I know anything to talk about?" As she spoke, she put the palm of her left hand in front of her and made a writing motion over it, then held out her right hand toward him. "I don't know anything. I really don't."

Ritter handed her his note pad and a pen. "I just thought you might've known her, that's all," he said, looking around the room as the woman scribbled in his notebook. "The truth is, we're stumped on this one and're talking to everybody."

"Yeah, well, I knew her name is all, I didn't know anything about her activities, and I sure don't know anything about what might've happened to her." She handed him his pad and pen. "Sorry."

Ritter looked at the note she had scrawled:

Call you tomor at work

"Okay, I'll be going. If you hear anything —"

"Yeah, yeah, give you a call. How many times have I ever called?"

"Never." Ritter said it loud and clear.

"Then you know what to expect."

"Ain't it the truth." He winked at her.

She turned back to the mirror. "Keep the faith, baby."

MONDAY SEEMED SLOWER THAN USUAL AS RITTER WAITED for the call. The newspaper story of the murder was on page three of the morning edition, which carried two photographs, one a recent portrait of LeAnn Hanson, the other a shot of the lone Eagle in the parking lot with its door open. Next to the pictures was a deck headline:

YOUNG WOMAN SLAIN BODY FOUND IN SHOPPING MALL

The article did not mention heroin specifically, but stated that a large amount of apparent contraband had been discovered in the vehicle and was awaiting laboratory analysis.

Ritter got a copy of the autopsy report, which showed that LeAnn Hanson had no alcohol or illegal drugs in her system when she died. The bullet had ricocheted in her skull, tunneling through her brain and finally lodging against the malar bone by her left eye. Made of steel, the slug itself was in relatively good condition, and ballistics had identified it as .32 caliber. The lab team had gotten no prints off the car other than those of the victim. Weighing exactly 225 grams, the heroin was only twenty per cent pure.

At four o'clock the call came.

"This is Bambi."

"Sorry about dropping in on you last night," Ritter said. "I tried to call you at home."

"That's okay. You prob'ly helped me. Now that Dynamite's got the place wired, I make all the right sounds."

"He doesn't know you're on to him?"

"Nah. He thinks he's so smart, but paranoid's what he is."

"Maybe we ought to jerk him, just to confirm it."

"Nah. He doesn't deal hard stuff, and the gambling and you-know-what is small-time. You've got bigger things to worry about."

"That's true."

"It's Kind Billy Freeland you want."

Ritter paused. Kind Billy was a black streetwise player who had made a name and a fortune as a pimp without ever being arrested. "Is he trying to increase his wealth by dealing slam?"

"You got it. Soon as you took Cosso out of the game, he moved in. He's doing it."

"Why'd he smoke the Hanson girl?"

"He hates women. In fact, why else would anybody be a pimp?"

"Don't take it personally," Ritter said. "He not only hates women, he probably hates everybody."

"Yeah. He's as bloodthirsty as a tick. I told LeAnn not to do it, but she wouldn't listen."

"Back up."

"She found three or four packs in Cosso's desk and thought she could make a big turn by cutting it and selling it to Kind Billy. She wanted to get enough together to leave town and start over." Bambi sighed heavily. "Always a dreamer."

"Everybody needs something."

"If there's such a thing as reincarnation, maybe we can all start over."

"So she set up a meet . . ."

"Yeah. But she was out of her league. She cut the stuff with milk sugar only. Christ, Kind Billy could taste it and tell it had been tromped on. I think that's prob'ly what happened: he got pissed at her trying to juice him with lemonade and blew her away."

"He left the bag in the car."

"That's just like him. An advertisement. A warning to any would-be speculator."

"You mean he might've killed her as an example?"

"That's what he did with one of his girls last year, Mandy Garth, shot her in the head and left her body in a garbage can right on the street." Her tone took on a hard edge of bitterness. "But of course you couldn't get him then either."

"Wasn't my case, Bambi," Ritter said gently.

"Yeah. I know how those Homicide dicks think: 'She was a hooker and good riddance, who cares?' And they're going to say the same

about LeAnn, that she was a tramp and a pusher and — ” She began to cry. “Oh shit,” she said.

“Bambi, I’ll get him, I promise you.”

He heard her blowing her nose and sniffing, then she came back, her voice hoarse and shaking. “I hope so. But I don’t believe you.”

She hung up.

“Can’t say as I blame you,” Ritter said to the dead phone.

MATHER AND PATINO WERE READY TO GO ON THE STREET. They wore cotton chambray shirts, patched jeans, and faded denim jackets; their hair was unkempt and their beards scraggly, and Patino had a string of love beads around his neck.

“I want it tonight,” Ritter told them.

They both stared at him. “This isn’t like you,” Mather said. “What’s going on?”

“I want Kind Billy, and the only way I can snag him is to get one of his bagmen to sing.”

“We can make a buy off of Deep Roy,” Patino said, “but he’s no squirrel.”

“Is this Leroy Clayton you’re talking about?”

Patino smiled and handed Ritter a computer printout — the modern version of the old rap sheet.

“Earl Leroy Clayton,” Ritter read. “NMA, alias Clayton Earle and Roy Clayton, aka ‘Deep Roy.’ I don’t see what’s deep about him — this guy’s a three-time loser: hot burglary, grand larceny, and possession for sale, not to mention the misdemeanors. One more felony conviction and he’s up for life. With that kind of net hanging over him, he’ll sing like a rock star.”

Mather shook his head. “But he’s careful. We can’t make a good bust.”

“You said you could buy, so do it and snap him. Don’t worry about making a case for court, just bring him in.”

Mather frowned and scratched his beard. “But it’ll finish us on the street, and it doesn’t seem worth it just for a roust.”

“Quinn and Ortega are ready to replace you,” Ritter said. “Anyhow, it’s time you guys shaved, I’ve forgotten what you look like under that fur.”

The bearded men exchanged a look, then got up and left just as McIntyre came in with the Homicide jacket on the Garth killing. “They don’t look happy,” he said. “Is it that time of the month or what?”

"I'm pulling them off the street," Ritter said, annoyed at Mac's way of asking questions. He went through the file on Amanda Garth, female Caucasian, 22 years old, shot in the forehead at close range with a .32 caliber weapon. Case unsolved. The slug was hard point steel.

"Sure, we know Kind Billy did it," McIntyre said. "Everybody knows he did it. You wanta try proving it?"

"I want to try proving he killed the Hanson girl," Ritter said. "It looks as though he might've used the same gun. Get ballistics to run a comparison on the slugs, will you?"

"Sure."

Ritter closed the door to his office and called Monica.

"It looks as though I might be occupied Wednesday night," he told her.

"That's too bad."

"This case is going to take everything I've got night and day for a while."

"Is that the way it has to be?"

"I'm sorry," Ritter said softly, "but you know how it is."

"Aye, aye, lieutenant."

"I'm disappointed too," he said. "But this case is important, and I'm determined to bust it. I'm no good for anything but work now anyway."

"Well, when you're good for something else . . ."

"Lady, you'll be the first to know."

When he cradled the receiver, he wondered how badly he had cheated himself.

But he didn't dwell on it. He had plenty to keep him busy for the rest of the day.

The ballistics check on the slugs from the Amanda Garth killing and the LeAnn Hanson murder was conclusive: both bullets had been fired from the same weapon.

"That was a mistake, Billy."

Things were beginning to look up.

Shortly after midnight Ritter got the call he had been expecting, and he went downstairs where Patino met him outside an interrogation room.

"Here's the stuff we bought," Patino said, showing Ritter two glassine packets of white powder. "We ran a preliminary test and I'd say it's about two-thirds pure."

"Pretty high grade. How's Leroy taking it?"

"He's trying to keep cool, but he knows something's hinky because we didn't make a clean bust, so he's a little uneasy."

"Good."

"He wants to call his lawyer."

"Wonders never cease," Ritter said. He took a deep breath. "Now, once I get on him, I don't want any interruptions, no matter what I say, got it?"

Patino nodded, and Ritter slammed open the door to the interrogation room and watched the prisoner jerk in his chair.

"This is Lieutenant Ritter," Patino said as he went to stand behind the chair and nudge Mather into silence. "He'll explain your situation to you."

"There ain't no 'situation.' " Deep Roy said with a sneer, then glowered at Ritter. He was a medium sized man with caramel skin and an Afro blowout; he wore a white pirate shirt unbuttoned to the waist that showed off two necklaces strung from shells and a long scar across his chest. "You gonna let me call my lawyer?"

"As soon as you're booked," Ritter answered. "But I want you to know what to expect if we book you."

"I know," Deep Roy smirked. "My lawyer cuts me loose, and you decide to drop the charges 'cause you got no glue, man, that can makem stick. Ain't no prosecutor gonna push a case of entrapment." He snapped his head backward. "These dudes practically begged me for that stuff."

Ritter smiled and shook his head. "Oh no, that's not the way it's going to be. Do you think we're simple? Listen: I've got depositions on my desk from three others that say you *pushed*. What do you think of that?"

The man glared at Ritter and said nothing.

"I mean, we're prepared. We've got unimpeachable testimony — enough to convince any jury."

The defendant was visibly shaken, but he remained silent.

Ritter stared at him for a few moments, then said, "Okay, it's belly up."

"What you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I'm talking about your belly."

"You talkin' jive."

"I don't think so, Leroy, so let's not waste time. You're in the barrel, baby, and you're jammed in tight." He paused. "However, we're

willing to make you a deal."

"I ain't in nothin', man. This whole thing is set up and you know it."

Ritter shrugged. "That's what *you* say. But, although I don't go along with it personally, these guys will go into court and say you solicited."

"Man, that's *perjury*!"

"I know, it's a terrible thing. Like I say, I don't approve of it personally. But these are drastic times, so I'm not real concerned with technicalities right now. And let's not forget you *are* guilty."

"Guilty of bein' set up."

"Your word against the word of two law enforcement officers, your record against their record — plus the other testimony I'm holding. How much of a chance do you think you've got?"

"Man, this is rotten."

"It may be, for you. Especially since you've got the 'habitual criminal' rap to face. A life sentence is what you'll get. That means 'So long, Leroy.'"

"Why you doin' this to me?"

Ritter folded the fingers of his left hand and examined the nails as if his real interest lay there and not in the prisoner. "Nothing personal," he said with indifference. "And there is a way out."

"What's that?"

"You can roll over on Kind Billy."

"Oh *man*! That'd be signin' my death warrant. You know I can't do that."

"You've got to."

"No way. He'll starch me."

"Let me pull your coat to this, Leroy: it's the only chance you have. And I mean *only*. Because if you don't, we're going to bang you on this charge and then we're going to let word get around that you rolled over anyway. Now, how long do you think you'll last, either in local or in the slammer? Tell me, how long?"

"Oh man, this is *rotten*!"

"You're repeating yourself and wasting my time. Give us what we want and we'll work things out. For you. Otherwise, Leroy, I wouldn't start reading any long books."

The prisoner stared at Ritter. "I think you bluffin'."

"Hold on to that thought," Ritter said, and stood up. "It'll be your last one."

"You bluffin'."

Ritter started for the door, then stopped and turned around. "Remember Manny the Shoe?"

"Yeah."

"Horrible thing, wasn't it? We never did find all of him — or who snuffed him. Right in jail, remember?"

"So what?"

Ritter looked at the prisoner evenly, with no expression on his face. "He thought I was bluffing too."

Deep Roy swallowed loudly. "How can you work things out? Who's gonna protect me, man?"

"With the information you give us, we can nail Kind Billy, we can get him, and with any luck he'll be gone a long time —"

"Luck!"

"Look at it this way, Leroy: what choice do you have? For you the odds are better if you roll over. It's not you we want, it's Kind Billy, and we want him for a lot of reasons." He leaned across the desk and looked Deep Roy straight in the eye. "We're determined to sink his boat," he said slowly and emphatically. "Do you want to drown too?"

"No."

"Smart choice. Give us a signed statement that Kind Billy is your supplier and tell us where the mill is."

"Then I go free?"

"We'll have to book you and keep you in jail temporarily for our protection as well as yours, but the D.A. has agreed to *nol-pros* you."

"Do what?"

"You never heard of *nolle prosequi*? It's a legal term meaning the D.A. won't prosecute."

"What happens when I walk away?"

"You're not going to be staying around. What we give you is your freedom and a ticket to the city of your choice — as long as it's out of the state."

"That ain't much."

"It's your life."

THE NEXT DAY RITTER SPENT COMPOSING A DOCUMENT OF compelling urgency in which he outlined Kind Billy Freeland's role in the city's ever-increasing drug traffic. Based on one item of fact — the purchase of heroin from Deep Roy — and "subsequent developments," however creative, Ritter managed to put together a convincing portrait of a ruthless, large-scale dealer who posed a threat

to society. Deep Roy's confession was the anchor of truth that held Ritter's ship of evidence secure against the gales of challenge, and he made the most of it.

On Wednesday morning he delivered copies of Deep Roy's signed statement to Captain Wirtz, and extemporized at length on his confidential report at the same time, making it appear to be the result of an intense effort of long standing. Finally he connected the Hanson and Garth murders, and drew all the lines of evidence and suspicion together to point to Kind Billy. "I think we've got enough for an indictment," he concluded, watching the captain closely.

Wirtz looked up from the papers and nodded. His eyes were hard as porphyry and his mouth was a grim line that moved only for somber and sober words. "I'll talk to the D.A. this afternoon and see if we can get this to the Grand Jury right away."

Ritter stood to leave. "Thanks," he said, beaming.

Wirtz looked him coldly in the eye. "Is this report good?" His face was a rock with human features. "Is it righteous?"

"Every word of it," Ritter said without the slightest hesitation.

THE GRAND JURY RETURNED A TRUE BILL ON THE FOLLOWING Tuesday, and Ritter started organizing what he had come to think of as The Bust. "I want this to be as well planned as D-Day," he told the other officers, among whom were McIntyre and three Homicide detectives. "At the exact same time that the mill is taken, I want us to hit Kind Billy like gangbusters on speed."

And it happened precisely that way. Six patrol cars blocked every exit from The Black Hawk, a slum groggery that Kind Billy owned and lived above in surprising opulence. Ritter and the other plainclothesmen went in with weapons drawn and adrenaline pumping. The bartender, a dark man with shoulder length hair twisted into dreadlocks, already had his hands in the air, and the few customers were as still as tombstones.

Upstairs, Kind Billy made no protest, although Ritter encouraged him to — "Come on, make a move, scratch, twitch, anything!" But Kind Billy Freeland sat perfectly still behind his large teak campaign desk, both hands resting on a baize blotter, a tiny smile on his face. Otherwise, he showed no more expression than a coin. He did not even blink.

Ritter felt empty. A search of Freeland's apartment turned up several packets of high grade heroin, five ounces of cocaine, and a

Smith & Wesson .38 "Centennial" revolver — and its registration. "This is a nice gun," McIntyre said. "Compact, well-made, and powerful for a snub nose. Beautiful little thing, isn't it?"

"And clean as an angel's halo," Ritter snapped.

"Ah, come on, Lew, you didn't expect to find a dirty .32 just lying around, did you?"

"He's cocky, and cocky people make mistakes."

Downstairs, a sawed-off 12 gauge Hi-Standard was found under the bar with a woven leather blackjack and a Bauer .25 automatic — but no .32 of any kind.

"I'm going over to the mill," Ritter said.

McIntyre rode with him, as elated as Ritter was dejected. "You expect too much, Lew," he said. "You got a number one dope bust, be satisfied."

"I promised I'd get him."

"Who'd you promise — Geraldine?"

Ritter didn't answer.

"I ran down her telephone number, but I didn't bother with it. She wouldn't tell me the time of day to save her life . . . and I knew you'd talk to her."

"I did."

"Yeah, well, keep it in the family."

"Step-sister," Ritter said.

McIntyre shrugged. "Family's family."

"Shut up," Ritter said.

McIntyre was silent for the remainder of the drive, which took no more than a minute. The mill was in a dingy apartment house at least two miles away from Kind Billy's bar. All of the buildings on the street were low, mostly two and three stories, dilapidated, and bordered with trash the way a slip is fringed with lace. The litter and garbage gave off an odor of decomposition that caused Ritter to recall the stench of death and think of LeAnn Hanson and a girl named Mandy Garth stuffed in a trash can like so much refuse. His eyes glittered as he crossed the street.

Four uniformed policemen stood outside and two more guarded the inside door as Mather and Patino made a check list of the contents of the back room. All of the partitions inside had been removed, and the one window was covered by an army blanket tacked to the casing. The furniture consisted of three folding chairs, a large table covered with plexiglass, and a metal bookcase. On the shelves were plastic jars of

dextrose and quinine, measuring spoons, a strainer made of a nylon stocking stretched over a coat hanger, bundles of rubber bands, plastic bags, packages of aluminum foil, a box of manila envelopes, an ordinary kitchen sifter, and a balance scale of the type used by druggists. The table held a Bunsen burner, a surgical mask, and some empty cartons; in its large center drawer were several tightly wrapped plastic bags and a .32 Spanish Star Echeverria automatic.

"Eureka!" Ritter said, and turned to McIntyre. "What do you want to bet?"

"I wouldn't bet with you," Mac said. "You're too lucky."

THAT NIGHT MONICA NESTLED AGAINST HIM AND PUT HER arm across his chest. "I read the book you gave me," she said. "Remind me to stay out of Los Angeles."

"Why?"

"Because when the cops out there mistook a kid for one who'd been reported missing, they forced the mother to take him home, ignoring her protests that the kid wasn't hers. And when she brought him back, they had her committed to a psychiatric ward."

"Those L.A. cops don't like to be contradicted," Ritter said.

"That was over fifty years ago, I forgot to mention."

"They still don't like to be contradicted."

The telephone rang and Ritter deftly moved his arm up and lifted the receiver off its cradle.

As if on cue, Monica slipped out of bed and began putting her clothes on. When he set the telephone down, she said, "You've got to go."

Ritter stood and began grabbing his clothes. "Sorry."

"I'm used to it. After all, that's what 'Monica' means — *alone*."

"Really? What does 'Lew' mean, do you know?"

She smiled ruefully. "It means *the people's defender*."

He grinned. "Well, I'll be damned."

Epilogue

AT 1:10 A.M. THE TELEPHONE RANG AND THE MAN IN THE custom-made suit lifted the receiver and closed the door to the booth. "Benjamin," he said.

"Well done," the voice from Washington pronounced. "A job well done."

Like a slave they rushed him toward the dais, and they forced his palms flat against his cheeks while the iron collar clamped his wrists to his neck.

Dead Giveaway

by DAN J. MARLOWE

STEPHANIE BLAKE WAS ON HER WAY TO BED WHEN SHE heard the door chimes. The faint hum of the air conditioning accompanied her into the front hall. Outside the condominium-apartment on Ponchatoula Street in New Orleans, the oppressive summer night's

heat was almost like a substance with weight.

She was surprised to see George Henderson when she looked through the peephole. "Good to see you up and around again, tiger," he greeted her when she opened the door. "I need my tennis partner before I start fattenin' up." He moved past her toward her study, as he always did, his target the wallcase containing the collection of antique swords she had inherited from her father.

"Insomnia, George?" Stephanie inquired, watching as he opened the case and took down the weapon she called the Ardennes Sword. It was an early Roman relic.

He didn't answer her. "Man!" he breathed reverently, slicing the air in whistling slashes with the two-edged fighting steel. Its massive hilt fitted his big hand in a manner that suggested there must have been giants in those days, too, Stephanie reflected. George Henderson was a forthright mountain of a man. He stood six feet four inches tall, and he weighed 280 pounds.

"Now there's a *sword*!" George exclaimed, continuing his cutting and thrusting. "Nothin' like the cakecutters we use at the club."

George was a homicide bureau detective, and a good one, but his admiration for the sword was no affectation. He might look like an ex-athlete running to fat, but twice in the past three years George had been state saber champion. His wrists resembled the upper arms of an ordinary man.

"Insomnia?" Stephanie tried him again.

George returned the sword to the case reluctantly. "How you feelin, Forehand?" he answered her question with a question. He called her "Forehand" because it was the basis of her steady tennis game.

"Fine," she lied.

"That's not what I hear from your associates in the legal profession," he returned.

Four months earlier while on a Central American assignment for the law firm in which she was a junior partner, Stephanie had picked up a bug from whose devastating after-effects her system seemed unable to rid itself. She was still on sick leave.

George cleared his throat. "Seen much of your neighbor down the hall lately? Wilhelm Hegel?"

"Not since I came home from the hospital." Stephanie tried to assess George's tone. "Why?"

He removed a newspaper clipping from his shirt pocket and handed

it to her. CORPORATION OFFICERS MYSTERIOUSLY SLAIN, the headline said. DIRECTORS OF KROELICH IMPORT-EXPORT FIRM FOUND DEAD. Stephanie handed the clipping back. She had no need to read the text. There had been almost nothing else on radio and television for the past thirty-six hours, but she had forgotten that her neighbor, Wilhelm, was an officer of the Kroelich Company. "I know Wilhelm wasn't killed, because I saw him in the foyer this morning," she said. "You think he's involved?"

"Got to be," George said, scowling. "I know you corporate types don't keep up with our local crime waves, but five people were just about obliterated inside the Kroelich soundproofed boardroom. There were five bodies inside, only we couldn't tell was it three, five, or seven till Doc sorted 'em out."

He paused for emphasis. "Look, there's a twelve-foot ceilin' in the boardroom, an' there was blood on *it*, an' on the walls, an' on the crystal chandelier over the table they sat around. They were whacked to pieces with a chunk of lumber, but there wasn't a sign of it except for the wood fragments adherin' to the bodies. An' you want to know the screwy breaks you get on a case like this? The lab says they can't identify the wood fragments. They claim they're not native."

"Not native to the area?"

"Not native to the country!" George snorted. "Ever hear anything so crazy?"

"So you're making no progress with your investigation."

The big man grimaced. "In reverse I'm makin' it. I'm in trouble with the lieutenant right up to my oversized tailgate. The press kept buggin' me, an' he overheard me tellin' a couple of 'em I thought an elephant had done it. Would you believe they halfway went for it? An elephant on the eighteenth floor of one of the biggest office buildings in the city?" He brooded for a moment. "At that, it makes as much sense as anything else I've come up with." His tone changed. "I want you to get me in to see Hegel."

"Wilhelm?" Stephanie's surprise was reflected in her voice. "Don't be ridiculous, George. He's more of an acquaintance than he is a friend. We play chess occasionally, have a drink together. I have no right to disturb him, and I won't."

"He might appreciate the chance for a quiet talk here rather than an official session downtown."

"No," Stephanie said. "I've no right to do it."

"Call him," George urged her. "Let him decide."

She resisted further, but the force waves emanating from the big man almost literally drove her to the telephone. "This is an imposition, Wilhelm," she said when she had him on the phone. She explained hurriedly.

"Bring him over," her neighbor said quietly.

"Great!" George enthused when Stephanie hung up. His ear had been within three inches of hers. "Let's go!"

SHE FOUND HERSELF BEING HUSTLED DOWN THE HALLWAY. Wilhelm Hegel stood at his opened door. He was tall and slender, with thick blond hair that looked shaggy. His appearance was boyish. Stephanie noted with misgiving that behind his hornrimmed glasses his eyes appeared anxious-looking.

Neither man offered to shake hands when she introduced them. "This meeting is perhaps as well," Hegel said. "You will come inside, please?"

Stephanie could see George mentally filing away the phrasing in Hegel's speech that indicated a language other than English as his mother tongue. She was turning to leave when she realized that Wilhelm was looking at her expectantly. "You want me to come in, too?" she asked uneasily. "As counsel? I'm not well enough qualified in criminal law to —"

"As a friend," Hegel said. "I have not that many."

She went inside, finally, despite a strong disinclination to become involved. Hegel led them to a sitting room and waved them to chairs. "I have a strange story to tell," he said, "and I would as soon a friendly ear heard it as an official one."

George's voice filled the room. "What is your capacity with Kroelich, Mr. Hegel?"

"None." Wilhelm's tone was firm. "At the present time," he amended his answer in response to Stephanie's look of surprise. "Originally, I was one of the founding partners."

"Your partners bought you out?"

"My partners and I were eliminated," Hegel said it bleakly. "We became entangled with financiers. I could not describe how it was managed, but we were frozen out. Completely."

"And the people who froze you out —?"

"Are the people whose deaths you are investigating?"

Stephanie didn't like what she was hearing. "George, since all this

is very irregular, I suggest — ”

His heavy voice overrode hers. “There was hard feeling over the ouster, Mr. Hegel?”

“Naturally. It was sharp and biting.”

“Your partners’ names?”

“My partners — ” Hegel hesitated. “There is a Helmut Fritsch. There was a Manfred Fritsch, his father.”

“Was?”

“Manfred recently became — ” Hegel hesitated again “ — irrational. He had to be institutionalized. Three days ago he died.” He put out a hand in a defensive gesture. “I realize how this must sound to you. And there is more, which you should hear from me rather than from another.”

He drew a quick breath, visibly bracing himself. “Helmut has been under a doctor’s care himself. He has telephoned me to speak of a recurring dream, a persistent nightmare that has tormented him. He tried to explain it to me, but I’m afraid I’m a man of limited imagination. Helmut became impatient with me.”

He removed a small, flat package from a pocket of his jacket. Stephanie could see an address label and cancelled stamps. “I received from Helmut yesterday a tape recording of his dream.” There was a sheen of perspiration upon Hegel’s forehead. “It is not pleasant. It is not — not natural.”

“Your friend Helmut flipped out like his old man?” George demanded aggressively.

“That is not for me to say.” Hegel said it stolidly. “I say that it disturbs me. I do not understand it, and I pride myself that I am a practical man. I would like you to hear it. I have your permission?”

Without waiting for it, he picked up from the floor beside his chair a leather case Stephanie had taken for a briefcase. He opened it, disclosing an expensive-looking tape recorder into which he inserted a cassette. “I give you Helmut’s dream,” he said, his husky voice betraying an inner tension that alarmed Stephanie.

He snapped on a switch, and a slight mechanical scratchiness was succeeded by a voice so harsh, so overwhelming in its metallic vibrancy, that it impacted upon Stephanie’s hearing as sound without meaning. “Too loud?” Wilhelm asked. He fiddled with a dial. “Helmut has an unusual voice. He is a powerful man.”

“I’ll just bet he is,” George muttered. He fell silent as the switch clicked again. Even at the lower level the blaring strength of the

reverberent voice was such that it took Stephanie a moment to catch up.

“ — sunrise was on the hillside when they dragged us out, naked in our chains, a soldier on each arm. There were three of us: Molhir of Alesia; the boy, Luctor; and I, Esserac, son of Molhir. Above the morning mists rising from the moat about the encampment the spiraling smoke still rose skyward from the breached walled town beyond.”

George Henderson sat erect in his chair, a frown upon his blunt features. He glanced toward Stephanie, then back toward the intently listening Hegel, shrugged, and folded his huge arms.

“The freshening breeze came to us with the persistent taint of death on this third day,” the tape-recorded voice continued. “The legion was drawn up in marching order behind the dais upon which the chosen centurions were closely grouped about the purple-cloaked emperor. The camp was struck. The stakes were down from the earthen breastworks, returned to the soldiers’ packs. The emperor’s tent was in the baggage train, the cooking fires extinguished. There remained only the disposition of us, the last of the vanquished chiefs. Death had been the decision of the council. That we had been told. Death to the vanquished in the sunrise, within sight and sound of the shattered walls they had fought to defend.”

George Henderson cleared his throat as if about to say something, then subsided. Stephanie didn’t think Hegel heard him.

“They thrust forward my father, Molhir of Alesia, who had fought them so long and so cunningly. Like a slave they rushed him toward the dais, and they forced his palms flat against his cheeks while the iron collar clamped his wrists to his neck. Beside me, Luctor gasped, paling. They dragged my father not to the block with its heavily encrusted axe, but to the posts, fresh timbers imbedded in the earth with a crosspiece between. So for us it was not to be the merciful axe, but death under the rods.”

Wilhelm Hegel had slumped deeply into his chair. His pale features glistened damply as the torrential tape-recorded voice thickened with passion.

“They suspended my father between the posts, and two soldiers removed heavy rods from wet sacking. They stepped up behind him and struck heavily, right and left. My father bit chunks from his upraised arms to keep from screaming, but that could not last. When the first set of soldiers cast aside the bloody stumps of their rods and stepped back to be replaced by fresh men with fresh rods, the

twitching mass between the posts had become a slobbering animal. It is not easy to kill a man beneath the rods."

The voice rose until it hurt Stephanie's ears. "God, how I hated them! The posts shook from the force of the blows, the left more than the right, and from between them there came only a sick moaning. Upon the dais, the emperor dictated to his scribendi, who wrote hurriedly upon his tablet, then rushed off. At its leisure the purpled arm rose languidly, and the crimson thing between the posts was cut down and dragged to the block. The same instant the soldiers' arms tightened upon my arms, and I was wrestled to the posts, close enough for my chest to scrape the blood-wet bark. There was a pause then while all eyes turned toward the block."

The voice had become such a guttural, snarling torrent of sound that Stephanie could barely keep up.

"I stood there with the hate of the world in my heart, and as the axe flashed downward, I seized the weaker left post. It came free in my hands at the second ripping lunge. I hoisted it high, scarcely feeling the blow on the head from behind as I wrenched post from crosspiece."

Wilhelm Hegel rocked slightly in his chair, eyes closed.

"I charged the dais with the post in my arms, scattering the soldiers. I was amidst them before they realized it, the four chosen centurions who had led the final assault upon the walled town that had been my birthright, and the emperor whose face turned the lemon-yellow of any other frightened man. I smote them, and smote them again, the joyous strength of twenty within me. I heard a ringing shout of command from in front of the drawn-up legion, and I tried to turn to charge them — " A solid chunking sound cut off the raging voice abruptly. It was followed by a drawn-out, gasping sigh, then two distinct thumps, one heavier, one lighter.

Stephanie could picture the upraised post falling, and then the man. George Henderson's big hands were tensed upon his chair's arms preparatory to propelling himself to his feet when the tape-recorded voice spoke again, weakly. " — I pity the — boy, Luctor, left — to the swords of — the legion."

There was silence then. Complete. It filled the room. The snap of the switch when Hegel turned off the recorder sounded like a pistol shot. Hegel stared at them, ashen-faced. "Each time I hear it — " he said raggedly, then stopped.

George was on his feet, his voice hard. "Cute sound effects there at the end, Hegel. How'd he manage it?"

"It is not my dream," Hegel said soberly. "You will have to ask the man who had it."

"Let's you an' me go do just that," George said briskly. "Have you talked to Fritsch since the massacre?"

"He does not answer his telephone." Hegel turned to Stephanie, his voice and expression wistful. "For a little while you nearly believed?" Stephanie didn't answer. She couldn't. Her ears were still filled by the sound of that haunting voice.

THEY RODE ACROSS TOWN TO HELMUT FRITSCH'S ADDRESS which had been furnished by Hegel. The night air was close and humid. Stephanie had been included only at her own insistence. "You're not able physically to go out yet," George had protested.

"If I don't go, Wilhelm doesn't go," Stephanie said with finality. "I can't let him go with you without representation."

George braked the unmarked police car in front of a long, massive-looking building that extended out over the river. "Damned if that looks like an apartment building," he observed.

"It's a warehouse that Helmut converted into an office and living quarters for himself," Hegel explained.

"A warehouse!" George echoed. His voice said that the statement told him all he needed to know about Fritsch's sanity.

Sounds of the river current sucking at pilings were audible as they stood at the front entrance. Hegel produced a key, and George looked at Stephanie significantly as the blond man used it. The place was cavernously gloomy inside, tremendously high-ceilinged. George marched from area to area, calling for Fritsch. There was no response. Stephanie became conscious of an increasingly swampy odor that clung to the nostrils.

The cement underfoot turned to dirt, then to a black-looking muck. George's flashlight played upon odd-shaped shrubs, small trees, snake-like vines, flowering lianas, and menacing-looking plants of types Stephanie had never seen before. Increasingly, the growth filled the area as they advanced. The place had the dank, marshy smell of the forest primeval. Stephanie could hear George muttering to himself as he pushed his way through the thicket.

The farthest corner of the building had been set aside for office space. An incongruously rich-looking rug covered a twenty-foot square. A desk and three filing cabinets were ranged against the rear

wall. George stopped so suddenly that Hegel ran into him. Stephanie, following, bumped into Wilhelm. They all stared down at a bearded, naked body face down upon the carpeting.

Hegel's breath hissed sharply. The deadly-looking shaft of a bone-handled knife protruded from beneath the left shoulder-blade. George dropped to one knee to examine an outflung arm, palm up on the rug. Stephanie could see bark and bits of wood clinging to fingers and palm.

"Turn on the lights," George said to Hegel. Wilhelm groped his way beyond the desk and located the switch. Stephanie turned away as the light lent stark reality to the situation which in the glow of George's flashlight had resembled a scene upon a stage. Off to one side she saw on the rug a stout timber, shaggy-barked, one end of which was black with the swamp-muck surrounding them. The other end was also darker than the intervening stretch of bark between.

"Tell us about it," George said curtly to Hegel.

"I don't know what you mean," Wilhelm replied.

"You quarreled with Fritsch about what happened at Froelich's," George said. "It was Fritsch's idea, and you were afraid you'd be involved. You came over here, one thing led to another, and you killed him. Right?"

Hegel firmed his lips in the manner of a man who has said all that he intends to say. Stephanie was glad to see it. George went to the telephone on the desk and called homicide headquarters. Then he drew Stephanie aside. "I shouldn't say it, but if the loony jumped Hegel, you can probably plead self-defense, or at least manslaughter," he said in an undertone.

The long ride across town had tired Stephanie more than she would have believed possible. She felt lightheaded. "Why does it have to be Wilhelm who killed him?" she asked.

"Who else?" George rebutted. "He had a key. He was leary of Fritsch ever since Fritsch's old man jumped his trolley, especially after the phone calls about the dream."

Stephanie's eyes went again to the bearded face on the carpeting. Even in death it was a strong face. That high-cheekboned death-mask could certainly have hated with savagery and passion.

GEORGE PUSHED THE MEDICAL EXAMINER HARD WHEN HE came. "Don't rush me," the medical examiner kept complaining. "All right, all right," he said finally. "A single knife thrust, by an expert. Plus a nasty bruise on the back of the head."

"You noticed his hands, Doc?"

"I noticed. It will have to be checked out, but for a guess, this is your berserker from the boardroom."

"One man could have done all that?"

The doctor hesitated. "One maniac," he said at last.

Before they left, Stephanie watched George peel off a strip of bark from the fallen timber. Outside, George tried to place Hegel in a cruiser with three detectives while he urged Stephanie toward his own car. She resisted his hand on her arm. "Wilhelm rides with us or I'll report you to the district attorney's office in the morning!" she said hotly. She didn't like the sound of her own voice. It was too high-pitched, too hysterical. She didn't even know if she was within legal bounds in making the demand.

But George shrugged and waved the car of detectives away. Hegel climbed silently into George's car and sat like a stone image in a rear seat corner. Stephanie sat beside George. "That tape, George," she began. "Fritsch —"

"Hegel found the tape there after he killed Fritsch," George interrupted her. He was using the same undertone he had employed before. "He added the sound effects at the end, then mailed it to himself. Neat. A tape-recorded alibi."

"You *know* all this?"

"Wouldn't you have, if you'd been him?" George countered.

A shudder began in Stephanie's central nervous system and rippled through her. "*Listen* to me, George! How do you explain Fritsch getting the timber out of the boardroom unseen?"

"He didn't," George said calmly. "An' in about five hours I'll tell you who saw him. The stenographic pool's just outside that room. Fritsch just bought himself three or four people."

"But the *tape*, George! Isn't it possible —"

"Whoa up, there, tiger!" George said it sharply, but then his voice softened. "If you don't believe me, just ask yourself what it is you're tryin' to make yourself believe. Okay?"

Stephanie subsided, her mouth dry.

THE BALANCE OF THE RIDE WAS COMPLETED IN SILENCE. A corner of Stephanie's mind was still listening to a tape-recorded voice. George's men escorted Hegel to his apartment in the small elevator. George and Stephanie had to make a separate trip. Outside her door,

he snapped his fingers loudly. "Forgot somethin', Forehand. Open up an' let me make a phone call, okay?"

When she let him in, he walked straight to the study and took down the Ardennes Sword in the familiar ritual. Stephanie started to tell him to get on with his call, then realized suddenly that he had none to make. George had decoyed her away from Hegel's apartment while George's men worked on Wilhelm.

Stephanie hurried through her hallway and down the corridor. "Hey!" George shouted. She could hear him pounding along behind her. At Hegel's partly-opened door, she caught a quick glimpse of Wilhelm sitting stiffly in a straightbacked chair, woodenfaced, while the three-standing detectives fired hard-voiced questions at him.

George's big body bumped Stephanie to one side. She shoved at him angrily, but it was like shoving at a pyramid. He was still carrying the sword, but, oddly, he didn't look strange with it in his hand.

"The man has rights!" Stephanie panted. She felt dizzy.

"Don't get shook," George attempted to soothe her. "The loony might not have jumped him." His tone was firm although his manner was discomfited. "We got to know."

"Not in any such manner as — " Stephanie began, then stopped. From inside Hegel's apartment a high-pitched, keening wail rose to a scalp-prickling crescendo. George whirled away from Stephanie to face the room's interior. She pushed herself into a fourth of the doorway beside him.

The detective team around Hegel stood frozen. The blond man had risen in a half-crouch. Unnatural sound poured from his throat in unnatural volume. Then he plunged through the knot of men in front of him and ran head-down toward the doorway.

"Here, you!" George commanded, and pointed at him. Wilhelm Hegel, unheeding, ran hard against the point of the Ardennes Sword in George's extended hand. The shock jarred even George's mountainous body backward a step. Hegel jolted to a stop, his chest spitted on the sword, the point of which emerged from beneath his armpit in back.

Stephanie heard full-throated screams as George Henderson eased the sword's burden to the floor.

Then concerned-faced detectives led her away, hands on her arms.

She was at her apartment doorway before she realized it was she who was doing the screaming. ●

*It wasn't easy being a criminal. With Officer Garronza
on the job, it was almost impossible!*

Smuggler

by BUZZ DIXON

IT TOOK MISS KENNEDY SIXTY-FIVE YEARS TO BECOME A criminal. For six-and-a-half long decades she was the pillar of virtue. She minded her p's and q's, dotted her i's and crossed her t's. Now she savored the delicious taste of crime; for the first time in her life she was

doing something illegal.

Miss Kennedy was going to smuggle a watch out of Switzerland.

She settled into the dark green felt of her train seat, watching the last toy-like Swiss train station roll up outside her window. In a few moments they would be on their way again, out of Switzerland and into Italy. Three days touring the peninsula, then a flight from Rome back to New York.

All she had to do was get the watch past the Italian customs authorities.

The watch — a handsome, moderately expensive instrument — sat tucked away in a far corner of her suitcase. Miss Kennedy was a mild and unprepossessing woman. Her hair was rinsed blue; her face nestled a pleasant smile among the wrinkles. She wore a tasteful but plain dress on her narrow, boney frame. So plain and unassuming was she that her baggage was rarely checked at customs stations and then only cursorily. She was counting on this to get the watch through.

Outside the train, passengers shuffled aboard. The air was crisp and clear and bright. The Alps sparkled as if tipped with diamonds.

At the thought of diamonds, Miss Kennedy nervously glanced at her suitcase. It suited her perfectly: Old, worn, battered, and scuffed, but otherwise in fine condition.

Like her it held a secret inside, and that secret was the watch.

The watch was for her nephew, her sister's boy. He was a fine young lad, one whom Miss Kennedy guiltily felt she'd never shown enough attention to. She hoped the present of a fine watch from Switzerland would make some amends for the years of neglect.

THE DOOR TO HER COMPARTMENT SLID OPEN ON SQUEAKY castors as the Italian priest stepped in. He was shorter than Miss Kennedy by nearly two heads — and Miss Kennedy was not tall. He was a fat, florid man almost as round as he was tall. Miss Kennedy smiled at the jovial, incongruous image before her. The priest looked like a beardless Santa Claus in a white collar.

He spoke to her in Italian. She smiled and shrugged. "English?" the priest asked.

"American," she said. The priest nodded and smiled. He sat across from her, his feet dangling slightly above the grey linoleum floor, a big, fancy attache case resting on his lap.

"Your first trip to Italy?" he asked.

Miss Kennedy smiled, glad to have someone to talk to so her nervousness over the watch wouldn't show. "Yes. I'm a school teacher — a retired school teacher, actually. This is my retirement trip. I always wanted to visit Europe."

"*Si, si,*" said the priest. He nodded vigorously, his collar disappearing under his double chins. "Europe is nice. I travel across Europe all the time. Business. What part of America are you from?"

"New York," said Miss Kennedy.

The priest smiled even more broadly than before and held out a pudgy hand. "Truly? I have family in New York. Third cousins. Don't worry, they're good boys, no Al Capones." He laughed good-naturedly as Miss Kennedy shook his hand. So warm and friendly was his laugh that she laughed, too.

WITH A LURCH THE TRAIN RUMBLED FORWARD, SLOWLY AT first, then picking up more and more speed. For a brief instant Miss Kennedy wondered if she should change her customs declaration to allow for the watch. She decided against it; a change would only make her look more suspicious.

"Are you staying long in Italy?" The priest had to ask twice before he got her attention.

"Oh, no," said Miss Kennedy. "Just three days. Then back to New York."

"Surely you'll stay longer? Italy is so nice in the spring."

"I would, but I'm almost out of money. I've barely enough for the next three days." Miss Kennedy wondered how much she could confide in him. She edged up a little closer. "You see, I bought a present for my nephew, a very nice watch. I've almost used up all my money."

"You have enough for the import duty on the watch, no?"

Miss Kennedy blinked. The priest's directness took her by surprise. "Duty?"

"*Si.* Don't try to smuggle it, *signora*, please. Italian customs are very good. Especially on this line. One man, Officer Garronza, is very good indeed. Smugglers may try all sorts of ingenious hiding places. They may resort to diabolically clever ruses and disguises. No avail. Garronza sees through them all."

"Many try to bribe Garronza, but he is too good a Catholic." The priest crossed himself quickly. "Garronza says if somebody smuggles something, he'll find it."

"How much is the duty?"

"Oh, *signora*, Swiss watches are very expensive to get through customs. Maybe you paid two hundred dollars for the watch? Then customs duty will be two times that."

Four hundred dollars! That would wipe out her remaining expense money. Fortunately her lodging and tickets were taken care of, but four hundred dollars would drain all her cash reserve.

"Why so much?" she asked dryly.

"Many, many people in Italy want Swiss watches, so too much lira goes to Zurich. Italian customs puts high duty on watches. A two hundred dollar watch will sell for four hundred, five hundred dollars in Italy."

A fleeting glimpse of signs and fences caught Miss Kennedy's attention. The border flashed past. The bright, sunny day suddenly turned dark and chilly for her. There would be no time to change her customs declaration — she could only hope to fool the customs officer.

THE DOOR SLID OPEN SO NOISILY THAT MISS KENNEDY ALmost jumped from her seat. She turned to face the tallest Italian customs officer she'd ever seen.

Actually, Officer Garronza was the *only* Italian customs officer she'd ever seen, but he *was* big and Miss Kennedy's fear and guilt made him even larger.

He stood at least six-foot-two and was molded of large hunks of beef, covered with a tanned and leathery skin, and wrapped in a thick black uniform. Two bright eyes peered out beneath a single thick eye brow that spanned his forehead. His dark and heavy mustache was twisted up in a bored parody of officious contempt.

"Customs," he said. "What have you to declare?"

Miss Kennedy said nothing but meekly handed him her passport and customs declaration. She almost told him about the watch but said nothing. She feared he would sense her guilt and find the watch.

But Garronza said nothing. His eyes flicked across her customs form then he stamped it, crisply folded it, and stuck it in a sheath of similar forms under his arm. He turned to the priest with the attache case. Miss Kennedy breathed a sigh of relief.

"Pardon me," said the priest, "but I believe the *signora* did not declare all she has. She told me she had a watch."

Like a well-oiled machine, Garronza turned to face her. The bored contempt was gone from his face; now he was interested and contemptuous. "Is this true, *signora*?"

Miss Kennedy desperately wanted to lie, but just as she'd transfixed three generations of schoolchildren with her steely eyes and wormed the truth from them, so Garronza was transfixing her now. She nodded.

It took Garronza only five seconds to find the watch in the suitcase. Miss Kennedy felt violated. The officer's big, dirty hands left smudges on all her underwear. He held the watch in one meaty hand, her passport in the other. He tapped them together sternly.

"This is very serious offence," Garronza said to Miss Kennedy. "I confiscate watch, your passport. Take you before magistrate."

The pit of Miss Kennedy's stomach plunged to some point between her knees and her ankles. "No," she said softly. "You can't. Please, you can't!"

The priest leaned forward and tugged on Garronza's sleeve. He spoke softly with him in Italian. Garronza listened, cold and hard, then nodded. "The father say you have a plane to catch. Okay, this time I let you go — but the watch I turn in, *si*?"

He handed her back her passport. Miss Kennedy was in shock. Garronza gave the dumpy little priest a smart salute then left the compartment, closing the door behind him.

THEY RODE IN SILENCE FOR SEVERAL MINUTES, MISS Kennedy fighting to keep from crying. The watch was gone, her present lost. Her beautiful trip was tarnished and blackened. The pleasant memories she'd hoped for would now be bitter and hard.

Tears brimmed her eyes. She looked across the compartment to the priest. "How *could* you?" she asked, her voice choked. "How could you betray me?"

The Italian shrugged and flicked open his attache case. He turned it around on his knees so she could inspect the contents.

It was brimming with watches — gold, silver, platinum: a cornucopia of timepieces smuggled from Switzerland. "Don't take it so hard, *signora*," he said. "Here, have any two you want." ●

He crouched behind the chair and waited. He had been there for hours, but he knew she would come. He felt the knifeblade and smiled. He would be ready for her!

The Fourth Friday

by DICK STODGHILL

HE SAT STARING AT HER PHOTOGRAPH. HIS EYES WERE OPEN windows that let the sickness of his mind escape into the room. They were taking her away from him. Pushing him aside like you'd kick an old pair of shoes to the back of the closet.

It was unfair. A conspiracy. He was the one who had worshipped her as long as he could remember. From the time she had been what, ten or eleven? He thought back, matching dates with events. No, she had been only nine. The others had made over her, placed her on a pedestal, taken their places as members of her court, but he was the one who realized she was a goddess, the only one who appreciated just how unique she really was. And they had always been so close, the two of them.

But now they had made her all but forget he existed. A castoff with no place in the excitement, the frantic preparations and, worst of all, the sickening adulation of the latecomer. The Chosen One. Prince Charming. The Intruder.

It had happened so fast. Their little get-together, the sudden unexpected announcement, the plans that didn't include him. They had influenced her, talked her into doing this, he knew that. And all so quickly so he wouldn't have time to do anything about it. Then, just to be certain, they had sealed her off from him. Always fluttering around her, giving him little opportunity to convince her how wrong it all was. The three weeks had sped by and now there were only three to go.

They had poisoned her mind but she had done nothing to prevent it. No, she had gone right along with them and that made it worse, made it hurt even more. If she had turned to him, asked him to send them away, it all would have been so different. Or if she told him it was a sacrifice she had to make, then he might have understood. But no, she was happy about it. They had done something to her and now she was no better than the rest.

And her patronizing manner, her newest way to hurt him. Patting his arm, smiling at him, telling him he looked so lost and forlorn. "Poor boy, you just feel left out of everything. But you want me to be happy, don't you? I won't forget about you, silly. No one can ever really take your place, you know that."

Lies, that's what they were. How could she be happy now? And no one take his place? That was the biggest lie of all. If it wasn't, why was she marrying The Intruder in three weeks?

He pulled the photo from its frame and held it up to the light, feverish eyes burning into it. Then he picked up a long, pointed knife and rotated it in his hand for a moment. Suddenly he lashed out at the photo, ripping it, tearing it with frenzied slashes until it fell to the desk in shreds. He had nicked his thumb and small beads of red dripped down on what had been her picture. He smiled then; a sick smile that went with his sick eyes. First blood, he thought. But not the last.

PATCHES OF FOG SWIRLED IN FROM THE LAKE; WHITE specters that formed halos around the lights along the drive and made the houses set well back from the street seem even farther away than they were. The sound of young women's laughter came from a cab as it stopped in front of one of the huge houses. A girl got out and another called, "Now don't forget, be ready early. We have a big day tomorrow."

"I won't," she answered, still laughing as she ran up the steps and along the walk toward the bright lights of the house, friendly rectangles of yellow in the mist. As she neared the door a hand shot out from the darkness of the shrubbery and grasped her wrist. She gave a little cry but then, when she realized who it was, exhaled and said, "Oh, it's you. You gave me a fright. What are —"

She stopped when she saw his eyes. Her own rounded as the knife was drawn from the folds of his cloak. "No —" she began but suddenly the hand left her wrist and was over her mouth. Light from a window glinted on the blade as it rose and descended, rose and descended.

RILEY CULLAN LOOKED UP FROM HIS DESK WHEN THE DOOR opened. "Superintendent," the secretary said, "the major would like to see you." He got up immediately and walked down the hallway to the door on which a bronze plaque read *Major Ira Wellington*. He knocked and was told to enter.

When Cullan was settled in a chair the major said, "Riley, I have something here I want you to handle personally. I'm sure you've read about these murders. The two on the north side that the newspapers are playing up so much." He waved a stack of papers on his desk. "It's revolting, these names they've coined for him. The Lake Shore Slasher. The Gold Coast Killer. My God, there's something depraved, almost ghoulish about it."

Cullan nodded. "But it sells papers. How does the agency come into it?"

"Henry Farmer, the father of the girl murdered last night, is an old friend of mine. He's distraught, of course, and isn't pleased with the way the police are handling the investigation. He wants the killer caught. He insisted that I come out but I'm seventy years old. I convinced him we need a young man on this."

Cullan smiled to himself. He had recently celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday. Apparently the major still thought of him as he had been thirty-two years earlier when he joined Wellington's National Detective Agency, a youth fresh from a military hospital.

Like most others in the neighborhood, the Farmer residence was ostentatious. A big, towering sandstone building that might have been

an armory or, with bars on the windows, a prison. Sinister, Cullan thought, but maybe that was only because he knew what had taken place inside the night before.

"It was my fault," Henry Farmer said softly. "I'm to blame. When I had the fire escapes installed I thought it was a wise move, a safety precaution. I never dreamed someone could pull one down and then —" His voice trailed off but suddenly blared out again, "I want this madman caught!"

"We all do, Mr. Farmer," Cullan said quietly. "Tell me, did your daughter know the other girl, Lillian Myers?"

"Of course. They were close friends. But the police have gone over all this."

"Please bear with me, Mr. Farmer. Something new might occur to you. Had she seen Miss Myers recently?"

"A week ago last night. The night Lillian was — was murdered. Audrey was very upset. Of course we never dreamed —" His voice broke.

"Had anything unusual happened involving them recently? Something out of the ordinary. Did the two of them do anything, go anywhere —"

Henry Farmer waved a hand impatiently. "Nothing. Nothing at all. They were excited about the Telfare girl's wedding but it's the fourth one in their circle this season. Nothing unusual about that."

A young man seated in a chair near Farmer cleared his throat. "There was one thing, father. That house party you were so upset about when you returned from New York."

Cullan turned to Carl Farmer, younger brother of the latest victim. "What's this, now?"

"Nothing, really, but it upset father."

"Nothing!" the elder Farmer snapped. "You call four young ladies going off alone for a weekend in the country unchaperoned *nothing*? Well, I don't. If your mother were alive she never would have permitted it."

The young man smiled bleakly. "Father, this is 1983. Girls do things like that all the time now. The servants were there, you know."

He looked at Cullan and cleared his throat again. "It was Marcia Telfare's idea. A month ago the four of them went off on what you might call a soul-searching venture. In any event, they came back on a Sunday evening and the next day Marcia announced her engagement.

Audrey was very secretive about it but still was dropping hints all over the place. Apparently Marcia couldn't make up her mind so they all gave their opinions, that sort of thing. Anyway, she decided to go ahead."

Cullan tapped the ends of his fingers together for a moment. "And you say there were four of them: your sister, Lillian Myers, Marcia Telfare and who else?"

"Jill Cosgrove."

THE COSGROVE HOME WAS THREE BLOCKS AWAY ON ASTOR Street. Its rear yard abutted that of the Telfare property on Lake Shore Drive. The Cosgroves called their residence a chateau but in Cullan's opinion it was just another of Chicago's cold, pretentious mansions. The family, shocked by the two murders, readily assembled in the drawing room at Cullan's request. There was only the young lady and her parents.

"Anything we can do sir, anything at all," the father blustered.

"But I don't know what it would be," the mother murmured. Her husband glared at her.

Jill Cosgrove leaned forward in her chair and fixed Cullan with a cold stare from red-rimmed eyes as if somehow he was responsible for the death of her friends. "First Lillian and now Audrey," she hissed. "It's so awful —" She began to weep.

Cullan waited a moment and then said, "Tell me about the weekend when the four of you went away. About a month ago, was it?"

"Four weeks today," she sobbed. "It was nothing. Marcia couldn't decide so we all went to their country place and talked it over. And now the wedding's only two weeks away and —"

"Two weeks?" Cullan said, surprised. "Isn't that rather fast?"

"Very," said Mrs. Cosgrove.

Her husband glowered at her again. "Quite understandable," he said pompously. "Business, you know. The young man — one of the Winfields of Boston and a good match — sails on the thirtieth for two years at the London office of the family firm. That's why Marcia had to decide one way or another without delay."

Cullan turned to Jill again. "Were — or are — there any other young men in Miss Telfare's life?"

She shook her head. "No." She frowned a little then and added, "Well, just Earl Maynard."

"Who is Earl Maynard?"

"An old —" Jill began.

But her father interrupted: "Family lived down the street until a few years ago. Went broke. The boy's still around Chicago but of course the Telfares would never allow . . . Well, it was rather presumptuous of the young man to still call, to even think they might consider —"

"Oh, daddy!" Jill cried. "Why are you so — so stuffy? Earl's a fine, sensitive person."

Her father went, "Humph!"

Cullan stared at the girl. "Have you seen this Maynard recently?"

She shook her head. "Not since Marcia announced her engagement." Her voice trailed away toward the end. She looked contemplative.

"What is it?" Cullan asked.

She shook her head. "Oh, nothing."

"Tell me, please. It could be important."

She hesitated and then gave a little shrug. "Just that Marica said Earl was upset. Really angry."

"With her?"

"With all of us. He thought we talked her into marrying Teddy Winfield."

"Did you?"

Jill shook her head. "Marcia's too headstrong for that. Earl knows it; he was just upset. Marcia listens to people, but she makes up her own mind."

Cullan tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair for a few seconds. Then he stood up. "I don't want to alarm you or your parents, Miss Cosgrove, but I'm going to arrange for someone to stay with you temporarily."

"What!" Cosgrove bellowed. "You mean a guard? You think Jill's in danger?"

Cullan nodded. "Perhaps. We won't take any chances."

AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS AN HOUR LATER HE SUMMARIZED what he had learned to the detective in charge. He ended with: "It's imperative that we find this Maynard right away."

"Absolutely," the detective replied. "Sounds like he may be our man all right."

The Telfares agreed to see Cullan the following day although Joseph Telfare made it clear on the telephone that he was not accustomed to receiving private detectives, and certainly not on Sunday. "In view of the circumstances, though — " Just like Cosgrove and Farmer, Cullan thought. Big businessmen. Cast from the same mold.

The Telfare home was even more impressive than the others he had visited. Or repressive, to Cullan's thinking. A three-story monstrosity of Joliet marble with a turreted tower looming ominously above. Simon Culp, one of the agency's best young operatives, accompanied Cullan. The family was awaiting their arrival in a large room paneled in ebony and mahogany.

Marcia Telfare proved to be a striking brunette of twenty-three with just a touch of haughtiness in her eyes. Disturbed by the murder of her friends, thought Cullan, but displeased by her forced attendance at this gathering. Her mother also was an attractive woman and more assertive than her neighbor, Mrs. Cosgrove.

Joseph Telfare, while obviously sharing Cosgrove's and Farmer's contempt for all things not connected with making money, bore little physical resemblance to the others. He was thin, almost cadaverous, with angry, impatient eyes and a nervous habit of tugging at a small goatee.

His son, Marcus, an eighteen-year-old cursed with acne and a chin that was nearly non-existent, shook hands limply and then retired to an oversized chair in a corner.

The two men who completed the group didn't bother with the formalities. Frederick Boswick, a cousin, was a medical student at the university and had lived with the Telfares since the death of his parents in an accident several years earlier. He gave Cullan and Culp an informal wave of his hand but didn't bother to stand. Teddy Winfield, the future groom, a cold-eyed, stiff featured young man who Cullan disliked instantly, merely nodded curtly.

Joseph Telfare took charge, as was his custom. "Unfortunate as the deaths of the young ladies may be, superintendent," he said, "I fail to see how they involve us."

Cullan shrugged, "Maybe they don't. But there's a possibility they do so your cooperation is appreciated."

"Well I think you're on the wrong track completely," Marcia Telfare proclaimed loudly. Surprised, Cullan turned to her with the trace of

a frown.

"How so?"

"Jill Cosgrove says you suspect Earl Maynard and that's ridiculous. He could no more kill anyone than — than I could."

"Have you seen the young man lately?"

"No. Not for more than a week. But that has nothing to do with it."

"But you were close at one time?"

Marcia shifted uncomfortably. "We've been friends since childhood, if that's what you mean."

Cullan leaned forward. "Did he have any reason to believe you were more than friends? Any understanding that —"

"Really, sir!" the senior Telfare interjected. "I don't see how this has any bearing on your investigation." He looked at his daughter and Marcia, blushing, glanced quickly at her fiancé. Winfield, stone-faced, stared straight in front of him.

After a few seconds Cullan turned to Marcia again. "Did he?" he asked quietly.

She darted another look at Winfield. "I don't know. We were — were very close. Perhaps he — oh, I don't know."

"Do you know where he's living now?"

Marcia shook her head. "No. He had an apartment on Clark Street but" — her face glowed pink again — "when I telephoned Tuesday they said he had moved."

Her mother frowned disapprovingly. "Really Marcia. You mean you called a young man's apartment?"

Marcia nodded defiantly. Cullan smiled to himself. Good girl, he thought.

The rest of the interview was uneventful. Marcia protested half-heartedly when told a guard would also be assigned to her but admitted she had a recent photo of Maynard. She turned it over to Cullan saying, "We exchanged pictures in the spring."

Cullan and Culp walked to the nearest trolley line. "What did you think of the Telfares?" Cullan asked.

Simon Culp, who held his superior a little in awe, didn't want to say the wrong thing. "Well, sir, they — I — that is —"

Cullan laughed. "I agree with your opinion." He handed Culp the photo. "Find him. Fast. Use as many operatives as you need."

Ordering Maynard found proved easier than running him to earth.

The major summoned Cullan to his office again the following Friday morning. "I can't understand why young Culp hasn't turned him up, Riley," he said. "Maybe you should put someone else on it."

Cullan shook his head. "Culp is doing everything that could be done. He has three operatives working with him practically around the clock and the police have as many or more on it. It's a big city, major, and we're not even sure Maynard's still in it."

The major pulled one corner of his bristly white mustache. "Well it worries me, Riley. You're doing more than just looking for Maynard, I take it?"

Cullan nodded. "We've followed up every lead without result. I've also had men at every house in the neighborhood. They concentrated on servants, mainly. Sometimes they know more than the pompous windbags they work for."

"Cullan!" the major barked. "I belong to the same clubs as the people you're talking about and — " His frown faded and a smile threatened to take its place. "They are an insufferable bunch, aren't they?"

Cullan laughed but sobered quickly. "I don't like it either, major. It's Friday again, you know. Both murders have been on a Friday. We've assigned a woman operative to stay in both the Cosgrove and Telfare girls' rooms tonight and we'll have a man downstairs in each house." He stared out the window at the buildings on the other side of State Street for a moment. Then he shook his head slowly. "But I still don't like it."

JILL COSGROVE GIGGLED. TRUST MARCIA TO OUTWIT THE guards who had turned the two houses into prisons. How did she manage to get the note over here? she wondered. She picked it up and read a second time:

"Jilly — I must see you, lovey, I absolutely must! All these stupid wardens, you'd think we were criminals. Well, we can outfox them, can't we? Meet me at ten tonight in the summer house — you just won't believe what's happened! Don't call me, though. They even have spies on the telephone. Can you really imagine it? And burn this, too, as soon as you've read it. If it fell into their grubby hands I might be shot at sunrise! But we'll show them, won't we, sweetsy! Love, Marcy"

She giggled again. That was Marcia, all right. Not going to let a little thing like a few guards keep her down. Then unexpectedly a twinge of apprehension swept over her. She hurried to a desk in the corner of her bedroom and sorted through a pile of envelopes until she found the one she wanted. She removed the letter and held it and the note side by side. After a few seconds she laughed. The handwriting seemed identical to her. Why had she even questioned it? She walked to the fireplace and struck a match.

The woman had been waiting in the hall when Jill left the dining room. She was nice enough but, still, having someone right in your own bedroom like this . . .

"I have the most awful headache." Jill held the back of her hand against her forehead and moaned a little. The woman looked up from the book she was reading. "Please," Jill said, "go down and ask cook to fix me a potion. She'll know what I want."

"Well, I don't know," the woman drawled uncertainly.

"For heaven's sake!" Jill said with peevishness. "It won't take you a minute but if you won't do it I'll go myself." She headed for the door.

The woman put her book down. "All right, I'll go but don't leave your bedroom. Promise?"

Jill gave her a gamine smile. As soon as the woman turned the corner of the hallway she dashed lightly down the servant stairway and slipped out the back door.

She stood for a moment, adjusting her eyes to the sudden blackness. A shiver traveled up and down her spine but she laughed to herself and thought: you big silly. It was dark, though, and she had to pick her way carefully among the bushes and trees. At last she saw the summer house in front of her. A shadowy figure was outlined in the doorway. She thought: Oh, good! Marcia's here already. She rushed ahead.

CULLAN HUNG UP THE PHONE AND SMASHED HIS FIST DOWN on the table. "Damn!" Why had they let her out of their sight? He had told them that under no circumstances were they to leave her alone for even a second. And the poor, foolish girl. Why hadn't she listened to him? But don't blame her. Not now, not after what's happened. He stood up slowly, suddenly very tired.

When he reached the Cosgrove house he tried to console the weeping operative who had let the girl slip away. He had intended to reprimand her. Now he realized it would do no good. The responsibility

had been his. It was he who had failed. He did what had to be done and then went home again. More weary, more discouraged than he ever could remember feeling.

Cullan returned the next day and went over it all from beginning to end. He took the female operative with him, had her run through exactly what transpired with him playing the part of Jill. The bedroom had been searched by the police but he went over it again. He found nothing pertinent until, while kneeling in front of the fireplace, a scrap of pink paper caught his eye. He removed it carefully. Only a corner remained unburned. On it he could see the word *we*.

How long had it been there? he wondered. Had Jill been lured to her death? What might have persuaded her to go outside? He ran the possibilities through his mind. He could think of only one that seemed likely: a note from Marcia Telfare.

Her eyes were swollen and webbed with threads of crimson when she came downstairs. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Telfare," Cullan said. He held the scrap of paper out to her. "Do you have stationery like this?"

She studied it a few seconds and then looked at him quizzically. "It looks like mine. Why?"

"Did you write a note to Jill Cosgrove recently?"

She shook her head. "Why? Where did you get this?"

"From the fireplace in her bedroom. Look at the writing. Is it yours?"

She walked to the window and held it in the light. "It could be. It's so hard to tell. If there was more —"

Cullan nodded. "I know. Who has access to your stationery?"

"Why anyone in the house, I suppose. It's standard stationery, though. Marshall Field's carries it and I'm sure a number of other stores."

"Does Earl Maynard know your handwriting? Could he have an example of it in his possession?"

For a second her eyes smouldered but then she shrugged her shoulders. "I've written to him. He could have kept my letters, I suppose." She turned away momentarily. When she swung back around her eyes were blazing again. "You're implying that Earl wrote a note and got her to go to the summer house, aren't you?"

Cullan hesitated before answering. Then he nodded. "Yes, I think

he may have. I believe someone did. The only thing I can think of that might have gotten her to go last night was a note she thought came from you."

Marcia sat down abruptly and put her hands over her face. "My God, that's awful. Poor, poor Jill." She looked up at him then and softly added, "But Earl wouldn't have written it."

When he reached the door Cullan looked back and said, "The wedding. Is it still on?"

She nodded her head slowly.

THE DAYS SLIPPED BY WITHOUT DEVELOPMENTS. THE STATIONERY proved too common to trace. More men were added to the detail searching for Maynard but the result was the same. Cullan assigned two female and three male operatives to the Telfare house for the entire week. It was quiet there, too.

On Thursday he returned himself to warn Marcia once more against going outside unescorted. He found her depressed, listless. Hardly the eager bride, he thought. Of course considering the circumstances it was understandable. But, he wondered, was it more than just the death of her friends? Could it also be the man she was marrying? If so, he could understand that, too.

The hours dragged endlessly on Friday. The wedding was at seven o'clock. Late in the afternoon Cullan started for the Telfare mansion. He had walked down only one flight of stairs when the secretary ran from the office and leaned over the railing.

"Superintendent!" she cried. "Superintendent, come back. Mr. Culp's on the telephone. They've caught him. They've caught Maynard!"

Cullan turned and took the steps two at a time. He listened to Culp's excited voice for several seconds and then interrupted: "Bring him in. Right away!" While he waited he couldn't recall just what Culp had said. Something about a tavern on Wentworth.

Earl Maynard was surprisingly sober for a man reeking of cheap whiskey. He and Cullan sized each other up like boxers waiting for the opening bell. Maynard needed a shave, a bath and clean clothes. He slouched in a chair eyeing Cullan sardonically. Culp stood at his shoulder and another operative was just inside the door.

Maynard spoke first. "I take it you're the chief of this monkey

squad." He jerked his head toward Culp and the other operative. "Your strong-arm boys got me here, so now what?"

Cullan stared at him a few seconds longer. Then he said, "You didn't know we'd been looking for you for two weeks?"

"Why should I? I've been gone for three."

"Where?"

"What business is it of yours?"

Anger surged through Cullan. "The death of three young women makes it everybody's business."

Maynard looked shocked. "What are you talking about?"

"The murders of Lillian Myers, Audrey Farmer and Jill Cosgrove."

Maynard jerked upright in his chair. The skin under and around his stubble of whiskers faded to a chalky white. Horror, tempered a little by disbelief, flickered in his eyes. He started to speak but had to swallow before he could. "Murdered?" he finally croaked.

Cullan tried to gauge the man's reaction. A good actor? An innocent man? Insane? There were people like that. Commit crimes but have no recollection of it. It was possible. After a moment he said, "Can you prove you weren't in Chicago the past three Friday nights?"

Maynard thought a few seconds. "The last two I can. Three weeks ago I was on a train." He hesitated again. "What you said about the murders, it's true then?"

Cullan nodded. "Where were you?"

"Pittsburgh. Visiting my parents. A dozen people can verify it."

Checking it will take time, Cullan thought. Suppose he's telling the truth? It would mean the killer is loose. Loose out there somewhere on a Friday night. The fourth Friday.

He looked at the operative by the door. "Telegraph the Pittsburgh office. Have them check it as quickly as possible and get right back to us." The man jotted down the name and address Maynard gave him and hurried from the room.

Cullan looked at his watch. Nearly six o'clock. An hour until the wedding. His eyes went to the window. Dark already. He felt empty inside. Something was wrong. He knew it. He wasn't sure why, but he knew it.

"I've handled it wrong from the start, he thought. I should have put one of the younger men in charge. Someone like Culp. They think differently today. Me, I think like the old days. Men on horses robbing a bank or train, I can think the way they do and I belonged in the west,

fit right in. Everything was simple, clear cut but this is so complicated, so involved, like that book Jekyll and Hyde. Or those stories about the detective in London. That's the kind of man who should be running an office in a city like this. He smiled to himself. Jesse James I could understand. In this kind of situation I'm lost but someone like Culp might not be. I know something's wrong but I don't know what it is or what to do about it.

HE CROUCHED BEHIND A CHAIR IN THE CORNER, THE ONLY one in the room. He had been there for hours now and soon she would come, too. She always came here when she wanted to be alone. He knew that, just as he knew she would come here before the wedding. She was like that, always wanting to be alone before something important happened. They had changed her, those others who pretended to be her friends, but she was still like that.

Not in other ways, though. They had changed her so she was just like them. He felt the blade of the knife and smiled. No, just like they *had* been. Had been before he changed *them*.

He tensed suddenly. Had that been a footstep on the stairs? There was only silence so little by little he relaxed. A mouse, probably, or the wind. But soon now she would be coming.

Why had they done it? Everything had been so perfect. Why couldn't they have left it that way? Why had they wanted to change it? They had been evil, that was why. And now she was just as bad. Worse, because they were gone now but still she was going ahead with it. Now it was too late. Nothing would ever be the same.

Yes, she would be here soon. Here in her Secret Shrine. Then he would show her what she had done, what she had let happen. She would understand, then, but it would be too late. There was only one thing left to do now.

He tensed again. Then he smiled. There was no mistake this time. Footsteps on the stairs.

CULLAN STARTED WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG. THE OPERATIVE at the telegraph office, he thought, and picked up the receiver. But it was a woman's voice and as he listened the color drained from his face. Then he shouted, "For God's sake, find her!" He dropped the receiver on the desk and jumped up. "Come on Culp! Marcia Telfare's disappeared!"

Culp waved toward Maynard. "What about him?"

"Forget him. Come on, hurry!"

Maynard had leaped up, too. "Marcia?" he said and then ran after them. "Wait, I'm going with you."

"What happened?" asked Culp when they were seated in a cab speeding north on State Street.

Cullan was livid. "How could she slip away? All those people and less than an hour until the wedding. But she has. She was dressed and ready early and then just disappeared."

Maynard leaned forward in his seat. "At the Telfare house?"

Cullan nodded his head.

"Then I know where she is. The tower. The door to it opens off her bedroom but that end of the room has been sealed off to make a large closet. Only the family and a few old servants would know it's there and maybe they've forgotten about it." He sat back again. "She calls it her Secret Shrine."

Now Cullan bent forward. "And someone who knew her well would know she'd go there before the ceremony?"

Maynard nodded. "Anyone who really knew her would be certain of it."

Cullan leaned from the window and cried, "Faster, for God's sake," to the driver. When they at last arrived the three of them ran to the house. Cullan pushed people aside and told Maynard to lead the way. When they reached the closet it was Maynard and a long rack of clothes that he shoved from his path.

He found the door, jerked it open and raced up the stairs. At the top he stopped abruptly.

Marcus Telfare stood crouched over the chair in which his sister was slumped. The blade of the knife in his hand shone from the light of a single candle. The eyes he turned on Cullan glowed, too.

Cullan advanced slowly, his right hand extended. "Give it to me," he said quietly.

The youth straightened, turning at the same time. Cullan stopped and for a moment they stood that way, statues poised and unmoving. Then Marcus Telfare eased back and took a step up onto a window seat, still brandishing the knife.

To Cullan it was like a vivid tableau created by some mad artist. The youth poised on the ledge. Beyond him the brightly-lighted buildings downtown. Off to the left the lights of a ship on Lake Michigan and

their reflection in the water.

He began slowly advancing again. Softly he repeated, "Give me the knife."

Fear suddenly welled up in the sick eyes in front of him. Marcus began shaking his head back and forth. "No," he cried and then again, softly, "No." He glanced quickly over his shoulder and then back again. Too late Cullan realized what he was going to do. He leaped but Marcus Telfare whirled and plunged through the glass.

Cullan walked to the shattered window and stood looking down. A moment or so passed and then he turned slowly back to Culp, "Better go down. No hurry. Don't say anything, leave that to me."

Maynard was kneeling in front of Marcia Telfare. She sat staring beyond him, transfixed, for several minutes. Then she focused her eyes on him and whispered, "Marcus. It was Marcus. Why? I don't understand."

Maynard took her hand. "He always had some sort of fixation. From the time we were children and he was only four or five. Didn't you know? Couldn't you see it?"

She shook her head.

"We used to joke about it, the rest of us. He idolized you. You were some sort of goddess to him. No one took it seriously, we thought it was just some boyhood thing he'd outgrow." Maynard shook his head, too. "My God, he must never have. Then, when you were going to get married, going to leave here — "

She began trembling, racked by unheard sobs. She leaned her head forward on Maynard's shoulder and put her arms around him. "Thank God you've come back," she whispered. He held her.

Cullan watched silently for a moment and then walked quietly to the stairs. When he reached the main staircase he found a crowd huddled at its foot, held back by agency operatives. He descended slowly, looking around for the elder Telfare. When he saw him he said, "I have to talk to you and Mrs. Telfare in private."

He was following them toward a door when Teddy Winfield took hold of his arm. The young man's face was even more frigid than usual. Irritation smouldered in his eyes. "The wedding — " he began.

Cullan jerked his arm free. "It's off," he said and walked on. ●

It was the same old routine — small-time crooks, pushers, pimps, dealers — day in and day out. Maybe today, something different would happen!

Nothing New Under the Sun

by JERRY JACOBSON

KELSO KEPT TURNING DOWN STREETS, BECAUSE THERE simply wasn't much else he could do. Down Third Avenue, west across McCracken to First, north up First to Vanderkellen and then east on Vandy. He felt like a mouse in a maze moving down plywood corridors and looking for the cheese. Sirens were screaming all around him. Patrol units turned up two to the block. Office buildings were pitching hundreds of office workers out onto the streets for lunch. Fervently, Kelso prayed nobody would start shooting.

The kid had walked up to a teller's drive-up window at the Vanderkellen Branch of Fidelity Mutual Savings Bank, just sauntered up as

though he were about to order burgers from a clown. The part-time female teller hadn't been told the cage's safety glass was an inch-thick and would repel any round smaller than one delivered from a Howitzer and so she hit the silent alarm button with the toe of her right shoe and began cramming bills into the transactions drawer, all the while trying to avert her gaze from the dark barrel of the kid's pistol pressed up against the glass and aimed into her perspiring forehead.

The kid lingered for two drawersful of currency. Then the sirens tore loose. He stuffed the bills into the maws of booster pockets sewn into the lining of a winter jacket along with the pistol, issued the teller a look of either menace or pure fear and then took off running. The teller screamed and threw up. She told Kelso the robber wore a ski mask and wielded the pistol in his left hand. She said the color of the mask was either orange or green. When Kelso's brief interview was finished, she turned to the bank's manager and told him she was quitting and to send her last paycheck to her address.

IT HAD NOW BEEN EIGHT MINUTES SINCE THE ROBBERY. Kelso was still cruising, but he was kissing the kid goodbye. Likely, he'd ducked into a department store or a hotel lobby or a cafeteria. He was foolhardy and desperate, but that didn't mean he didn't have both his oars in the water. His salvation hinged upon getting out of traffic and out of sight.

The whole Keystone Cop lot of them now were merely getting in each other's way and adding to the glut of noontime traffic. At a red light at Fifth and McCracken, Kelso pulled up alongside a black-and-white and tooted his horn. The window on the passenger side went down. Oscar Dinkleman, six weeks shy of thirty years on the force, peered out from behind a haze of cigar smoke.

"Lieutenant Kelso. Anything new under the sun?"

"Who's your partner?" Kelso asked of the unfamiliar face.

"Don't bother Officer Vico while he's driving," said Dinkleman. "I don't come around bothering you when you're driving, so don't bother my rookie while he's driving. He's gotta make signals, he's gotta turn, he's gotta work the key in the ignition. He has to be left free to concentrate on his work."

"Okay, okay. So you see anything of the suspect?"

Dinkleman took a draw on his cigar. "The Fidelity Savings heist are

we talking about? Forget that one, lieutenant. The kid's in out of the cold by now, parked in some pay toilet in some public john someplace counting his haul. Vico here thought he spotted him a couple blocks back, though. Winter jackets in the middle of May, wool cap that coulda been a ski mask pulled up. But the guy lit a cigarette on the corner with his right hand. And our guy is lefthanded."

"Well, in that case," said Kelso, "be kind enough to tell Officer Vico for me that he may have blown it. Rear view mirrors reverse their images."

Behind the wheel, the young officer slapped the heel of his palm into his forehead. "Eight weeks at the academy, they never mentioned Jack Sprat about reversed images."

Dinkleman turned on him with a dour look. "And whenever *you* combed *your* hair in a mirror, it never dawned on you *you* weren't lefthanded?"

"I never gave it any thought, sarge. I mean, who thinks of a thing like that when he's combing his lousy hair?"

"Forget it, kid."

"You going to make a report on me about it to The Watch?"

"No, kid, I'm not writin' you up. I got six more weeks here in Central and I'm not doing anymore paperwork than I have to. Because each piece of paperwork begets ten more pieces of paperwork, and I'm not going to be sitting at no desk doing paperwork three months after I turn in my shield over writing a guy up."

But it was for Kelso that Dinkleman reserved his most salient comments on working Central. "I tell you, lieutenant, I've been twelve years here in Central and in all that time there ain't been one blessed thing new under the sun. Hell, you been here on the dark side of the moon six years yourself, lieutenant, so I'm not handing you any bulletin. The porn houses, the Pan-o-Rams, the hang-out doughnut shops, the dance studios, all the bars and dives Jack London wouldn't have set one foot in. The parking meter riflers, the pimps, the *mademoiselles de evening*, the dealers and the pushers and the hypes. What's new about it, Kelso? It's like going to the same blue movie night after night for twelve years without popcorn."

What Dinkleman was saying was pitiable true enough, though Kelso tried to keep from dwelling on it. His career was now mostly history. Along its path he'd made enough tactical and political mis-

calculations to deny him any chance of a captaincy and now he was simply running out his string here in Central, covering for aging patrolmen like Dinkleman, while he brought along rookies like Vico, strangely caring very little about himself and his own fortunes.

"In fact there's so little friggin' new under the sun here in Central, Kelso, I'll give you 10-to-1 on ten bucks that the rest of the week, we don't get no crimes we ain't seen a hundred times before."

"Don't think I follow you, Dinkleman," Kelso said.

"I mean the same old sleeze, the same old street stuff. An exotic crime, a good, complicated homicide, something big involving a politician. Crimes like that."

"Give me 100-to-1 on a buck and you got yourself a bet."

"Coffee money," Dinkleman said with a sneer.

"Take it or leave it," Kelso told him. "The light's changed six times and we're blocking two lanes of traffic."

"Okay, okay. But it's gotta be some with some real wrinkles to it, more wrinkles than an elephant's prayer rug."

"Sure, Dinkleman, real wrinkles. It's a bet."

Kelso glanced in his rear view mirror. There was enough traffic backed up behind them to make up a parade that never ended. He motioned Officer Vico to move his tail and the rookie officer complied. Dinkleman tossed the stub of his spent cigar out onto the pavement for every citizen to see.

KELSO ALLOWED THEM TO BECOME SWALLOWED IN TRAFFIC before he himself moved out. Some motorist would be shooting off an irate letter to City Hall about littering cops who themselves cited citizens for littering and Kelso didn't want to field any guilt by association or proximity.

But still he was left with Dinkleman's cursed bet. Giving up a dollar to him wouldn't be the chief embarrassment. The main humiliation would come when Dinkleman was proved right, that here in Central they had no right to expect crimes of intricacy and glamour. The only right to which they could lay sole claim was the right to obscurity, just as anguished journalists were tormented by the fact that they were only the conduits through which passed the events and achievements of others, knowing painfully well they would all go to their graves making no news themselves.

Kelso now pushed all that behind him and swung his cruiser into Pullman Street, the city's prime boulevard of hopeless sleeze and marginal hype. Here at its northernmost edge, its ambience was not so blatantly on the skids. Huddled two-story sandstones harbored the borderline practitioners of bonds for bail, literature for revolution, herbal medicine, psychic weight reduction, patent investments, astral vacations through meditation, enterprises more foolish than flagrant.

In the teem of pedestrians and the blare of street traffic, Kelso picked out the dark spectre of a woman as she floated out of the mass of sidewalk humanity, frantically waving Kelso to pull in at the curb. Her eyes were shrouded in dark blue circles, outrageously visual even in a crowd. A stranger might have surmised her to be a victim of incessant beatings or occult violence. In fact, the shadowy circles had been dealt by the woman's own hand, deft needlework by the best former female tattooist on the west coast, and one year chosen the most beautifully tattooed woman at the International Tattoo Convention. But somewhere her notoriety and financial success lost out to her third-world environment, tragic love affairs and drugs. Now, she was just another street waif trapped under foot and drifting through her contrary world of emotional lows and cocaine highs.

Kelso rolled down the window on the passenger side and Madam Lazonga thrust her head through the opening. The vapid, lifeless eyes told Kelso her spirit had gone to other regions. Kelso stared at the head of a leopard peering out from behind the top of a sweater blouse.

"Hey, Kelso, man. Like, how's the wide side treating you? You keeping in your aspects?"

Kelso smiled and told her his aspects were all aligned and his planets all in positions of favor.

"Listen, Kelso, I got to score a couple hundred beans. Like, there's this big estate jewelry sale up in The Heights. Like, Victorian heirlooms, third-generation baubles. Very chi-chi stuff."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm hitting up my friends. A limited partnership. Rings, bracelets, antique diamond brooches. None of your art-deco, art-nouveau trash, Kelso. Lots of antique silver, too. And all undervalued because it's underappreciated."

"Well, Madam," Kelso told her, "I'm a little thin just now."

The veined eyelids batted out of control. "Tell you what, Kelso. I'll let you throw in for a hundred. I'll bid on some of the semiprecious

stuff. Garnets, topaz, turquoise. We'll start small and build our inventories, man."

"Madam Lazonga," said Kelso in a fatherly tone, "I give you \$100 and it'll all go up your nose in a cloud of powder."

"Ah, Kelso, I'm being straight with you and you're breaking my heart. Estate jewelry, Kelso. On the level. Hey, did I tell you they got my picture hung in the Whitney Museum of American Art? In New York? Yeh, it's true, Kelso. Some very big-time photographer did it and blew it up to a sixteen-foot black-and-white. It was a nude I did a few years ago. Could I get any royalties for a thing like that?"

"I'd bill them and find out, Madam."

"Hey, I'll do that, Kelso, thanks for the advice. "She began to cry, then. "Honey, if I don't score soon, I'm gonna find me an alley, lay myself down and go crazy. See ya'."

Just as suddenly as she had appeared, she was gone, floating down Pullman where life was as grim as death, where every soul hurried on down to oblivion and no time could be wasted on a handshake or a kiss.

KELSO PULLED OUT FROM THE CURB. DOWN THIS SAD street, all the way to South Pullman, he would encounter them all again today — the homeless, the alone, the purveyors, the sharks, the victims. There was indeed nothing new under his sun, just desperate, terrified people trying to gain a grasp of the cruelly greased bottom wrung of the ladder.

He crossed Seventh Avenue, sliding his eyeballs left to catch a glimpse of the chic shops and boutiques uptown, where uniformed men idled limousines at the curb and expensively dressed women cradled white poodles. His radio broke the silence. The manager of a midtown hotel had found a young male unconscious in his room. There were no signs of violence and no presence of weapons or blood. A Medic One unit was being dispatched to the old Brandenburg Hotel on First Avenue, just off South Pullman. The nearest hospital on First Avenue, ten minutes away under normal circumstances, but the tangle and snarl of noontime traffic would add five minutes to that response-time. Kelso could make it to the Brandenburg in two minutes and administer some early CPR. The saving of a life oftentimes hinged on such slender

advantages as these.

The down-at-the-heels Brandenburg was a five-story offense to the eyes whose bricks were soon to feel the blows of the wrecking ball. The entire block was scheduled for demolition, some buildings now merely hollow shells through which sea winds whistled coming off the cold sound. Driving up, Kelso saw a lone black-and-white parked in the yellow zone in front of the hotel, empty, with both its doors thrown open. It wasn't Dinkleman and Vico. And even if Kelso hadn't memorized all of Central's units and their officers, he would have bet against it being Dinkleman and Vico to have arrived on the scene first, simply by deducing that a rookie wouldn't know his way around Central that thoroughly and that a senior partner like Dinkleman would have an almost total distaste for leaving his patrol unit except for coffee breaks, meals, and trips to the john.

In the hotel's desolate lobby, Kelso identified himself to the single patrol officer stationed there to meet the Medic One unit. Cosmos Greene, the Brandenburg's day manager, decked out in his eternal green shirt and orange necktie, nodded his acknowledgement of Kelso.

"Kid's name is Tomlinson, Lt. Kelso," said Greene. "Nice kid. Works down on the docks loading those container ships. Keeps pretty much to himself. He's in 318."

Kelso noticed the elevator door was open, likely held on auto-stop for the arrival of the medics. He told the officer to retrieve it when he and Cosmos Greene reached the third floor and to hustle the medics upstairs the instant they arrived.

On the way up in the elevator, Greene filled Kelso in on what had transpired so far. "It was old Madge McGrundy in 316 heard the commotion. She heard the kid cry out for help and then heard him fall to the floor. His door was locked and she couldn't raise him, so she went back to her own room, called me and I let myself into the kid's unit with my pass key, found him unconscious on the floor and called 911. No wounds or anything. The kid's window leads to the southside fire escape, but it don't look like anyone came in and left that way."

The elevator slugged to a shuddering halt at the third floor. Kelso, as he stepped out into the dim hallway, sniffed the musty air for the presence of sulphur and was thankful to find it absent. That was one element of a shooting a detective never forgot, the sulphur.

"Cosmos, what else can you tell me about this Tomlinson?" said

Kelso.

"His life's a pretty thin volume, lieutenant. Came here about five months ago from someplace in Northern Michigan. Some little town with a deer or a bear in it. Deerton, Bear Bay, Moose Rock, something like that. Hiked in here with just a backpack, a change of socks and a twelve-speed bike. Sold the bike to get up his first month's rent and damage deposit and got himself a job down on the container docks the very next day. I mean, I could tell he was no transient or trouble-maker, just a kid who'd likely cut loose from home to take a good, long look at the world and see what it had to offer."

"He have anything like a nodding acquaintance with drugs?" asked Kelso.

"Never seen him drunk and I never seen him smoking no dope or blowing coke, either. A straight-arrow kid, like I told you."

"He have any enemies in the building?"

"No enemies, no friends. A loner. But he didn't hang out in any of the dives in Pioneer Square like a lot of the young punks do. He borrowed books from the main branch up on Seneca, played chess, shot billiards down at the Capricorn Recreation."

"He hustled pool?" Kelso asked.

"No, no, lieutenant, nothing shady like that. The thing was, he fell in love with those old, 4,000-pound 60-year-old billiard tables. All that inlaid oak and the leather pockets. Hell, lieutenant, you know the old Capricorn is the last of the oldtime billiard and snooker parlors on the West Coast. The kid is a pool purist, nothing more. A classicist." Cosmos Greene brought out his pass key and fitted it into the lock of 318.

WHEN THEY PUSHED THROUGH THE DOORWAY AND INTO THE room, Kelso's eyes met a scene that could be guessed at in a single glance with some certainty that the observer had reconstructed events precisely as they had taken place. There was a simple wood table set in the center of the livingroom, arranged with a chess board and its pieces. A chair was pushed back from the table and toppled on its side. The boy's unconscious form lay beside it. It appeared to Kelso the boy had pushed the chair back preparatory to rising, but could not remain conscious. He had a pulse but it beat weakly, in fits and starts, like a

light bulb flickering from faulty wiring. No chair was set on the table's opposite side, nor the presence of any chess pieces confiscated in the game.

"Whitehead, sir," said the patrolman, pausing a breathless moment in the midst of the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation he was administering. "He stopped breathing a couple of times, sir. If he doesn't get on support systems in the next five minutes, all that'll be left here is to put him in a body bag and zip it up."

The patrolman was not far off with that medical assumption. The boy's face was already growing ashen from lack of blood. Kelso felt his pulse rate again and was alarmed to find it beating even more anemically than before. He perked his ears for the wail of the Medic One siren, that chilling, banshee sound that belied the fact that help was on its way. This time, they weren't going to make it.

Kelso tried to regain his composure, his professional objectivity. What he had seen of the room thus far was merely cursory. It was now up to him to pick it all apart meticulously, with a surgeon's care and thoroughness. If the Tomlinson boy was to die, it would not be because Kelso had overlooked something and had left his living or dying to chance or to God.

He began a close examination of the things set atop the chess table. There were some news clippings, articles Kelso recognized to be wire service stories out of the Philippines pitting Anatoly Karpov and Viktor Korchnoi in the last world chess championships. Kelso compared the topmost clipping with the arrangement of pieces on the board. Early pawn, knight and bishop moves coincided exactly with the early moves made by both Karpov and Korchnoi.

With one glaring exception: white's king — where Tomlinson had been seated and playing on behalf of Anatoly Karpos — had been toppled, indicating a resigned game.

Kelso spent another moment re-examining the board and the alignment of its pieces. He paid particular attention to white's deployment and its fallen king. It was true Karpov's king was exposed and held in check by an adventuresome bishop; but the simple advancement of a knight's pawn would protect the exposed king and force the threatening bishop to beat a hasty retreat. So the fallen king definitely *wasn't* a signal that the match was being resigned; particularly not, since the game being recreated here by young Tomlinson

wouldn't be concluded until the forty-third move.

Kelso then considered the likelihood that the king had been felled when Tomlinson passed out and collapsed on the floor. No, he had managed to push himself back from the table, free and clear of the chess board. And, if *he had* fallen forward, it seemed to Kelso unreasonable that only the white king should be bumped over and not any of the other pieces. So the curiosity of it remained.

Tomlinson appeared to have been making brief notes on a scratch pad set off to the right side of the chess board. There was a note about Karpov's English opening and another questioning why Korchnoi's queening of an advanced pawn had not come earlier in the game, and still a third on a missed bishop's pawn advance to force the move of a bishop. It was all very heady stuff, far too conceptually complicated for Kelso to understand or appreciate.

The patrolman glanced up at Kelso. "Lieutenant, I'm hardly getting a pulse at all now. I can't understand it, sir. I mean, before you came in, I was pumping his heart and getting good circulation. Now, his blood's moving like Fatty Arbuckle through oatmeal mush."

Kelso frowned and continued trying to make some horse sense out of Tomlinson's notes. Finally, a siren's sound reached Kelso's ear, help he judged to be no less than six city blocks away. He glanced down at the boy's pale face, as his stomach turned in its grave. The Tomlinson boy was going to die.

There was another note scribbled on the pad next to the chess board, the printed letters C-R-Y, running pitiably down the pad in a waterfall of ink. A cry for help! Then why hadn't Tomlinson simply *printed the word HELP?*

"Little black kit here on the kid's bureau, lieutenant," Kelso heard Cosmos Greene say across the room. "Hypodermic syringe in it. Could the kid be a closet druggie? Or a diabetic? I mean, it's an injection kit, no doubt of it."

Suddenly, Kelso's brain was witnessing a glimmer of hope. He took off in a sprint for a brief length of hallway, spun into a bathroom and all but ripped the door to the medicine cabinet from its hinges. His fingers and eyes flew over the bottles and viles and tubes like small birds gone berserk. Aspirin, hair cream, vitamin supplements, adhesive bandages, sinus tablets, cough syrup, razor blade cartridges, nearly all of it plunging to its death in the sink via Kelso's frantic process of

elimination.

And then he saw it, a small, frosted, plastic vile capped with an injection seal. Kelso snatched it up and plunged back into the hallway on the dead run, hitting the livingroom in a half dozen strides. He grabbed the hypodermic syringe from Greene and jabbed it through the vile's seal, filling the syringe as he bent to raise a vein in Tomlinson's arm, nearly all in one motion. The Medic One siren was screaming now, howling up the side of the hotel building.

The patrolman was staring at Kelso with disbelief and utter bafflement. "So — what's he got, sir?"

"What's he got? He's only bleeding to death internally."

"What?"

"That was the scribbled clue he was trying to jot down just before all his lights went out." Kelso finished off the injection and carefully withdrew the needle. He wasn't surprised to see a clean wound with not a drop of precious blood coming from it. "He was pointing the way to his medication. The word he was trying to complete is the word CRYO, a concentrate of Factor-8, a blood clotting agent."

"Then the kid's a bleeder, a hemophiliac."

Kelso nodded. "That toppled king was meant to be a second clue against anyone missing the first. He hoped anyone examining the chess board would see it fallen on its side, recognize the game was hardly at the point of resignation and read the messages he was trying to leave to save his life."

"A *fallen king*?" said the patrolman.

"Hemophilia is known as 'the illness of kings'," said Kelso. "Tomlinson was banking on someone knowing that to go in search of his medication."

THE BOY WAS STIRRING, SLOWLY REGAINING CONSCIOUSNESS. Two paramedics were already lifting him gently into a stretcher. He would get whole blood on the trip to Harborview. Officer Whitehead returned downstairs. Cosmos Greene wiped a sweating forehead and told Kelso he'd better get back to his desk before the transients and drifters stole him blind. Kelso felt drained but he felt good. He went to the window where he watched the boy safely inside the back of the ambulance. Officer Whitehead was out in the intersection halting

traffic so the Medic One unit could get a flying start. Kelso's gaze shifted thirty feet north of the building where a second patrol unit was pulling up to the curb. The stub of a spent cigar flew out onto the sidewalk. The unit's young driver got out on the streetside and put on his hat.

There was a mildly perverse idea stirring in Kelso's head, one an old and pranking trooper couldn't deny. Dinkleman and Vico were coming into the Brandenburg, a day late and a dollar short. Quickly, Kelso fished a piece of chalk out of his suit pocket and drew a body outline on the threadbare carpet where the Tomlinson boy had fallen. Then, he returned the hypodermic syringe to the black kit on the bureau and the empty vial of Factor-8 to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. There too, he found the boy's Medic-Alert bracelet on the top of the toilet tank, which he transferred to the ledge above the sink. When Kelso returned to the livingroom, Dinkleman and his rookie were just coming through the door.

"So what did we miss here, lieutenant? An assault? Some drugs? Family dispute? The same old stuff?" Dinkleman saw the chalk body on the floor then. "Homicide?"

Kelso clapped a hand on the beefy officer's shoulder. "Dinkleman, everything you need to know to solve this little dilemma here can be found within the confines of the apartment. You know the boy was found unconscious on the floor by the building's manager, which is as much as I knew when I arrived."

"What . . . ?"

"Examine your clues meticulously. Now, I really *must* be going. Things to do, crimes to ponder, criminals to track. You know, the old routine."

Dinkleman's mouth was frozen on an oval. Officer Vico was already down on all fours tracing the chalk outline with his eyes.

"One other matter, Dinkleman. You can send two hundred bucks to Hilltop House in Madam Lazongo's name. Before the day is out, she may be needing it for bail money."

The burly officer grunted and made a note of it. "Anything else, lieutenant?"

"No, I think that's all," Kelso said. "Except for me to wish you a nice little case here."

●

He hated them. He hated them all, and it was a hate mingled with fear because of what they had done to poor Bobby. Through the coat pocket he gripped the shaft of the axe even tighter, and slid into the shadows to wait!

Axefall

by PETER A. HOUGH

GEORGE SKINNER WAS THIRTY-EIGHT BUT LOOKED TEN years older. He worked in a department store in town as assistant manager of the menswear department, a job he suffered because it seemed as good a means as any to earn a living.

He spent a significant proportion of his day attending to difficult members of the public who could not, or would not, make up their minds when buying. His dark pebble eyes bored down at them through thick framed glasses as he politely suggested: "Perhaps this colour would suit you better, sir? Well then, try the larger size. No, sorry, we don't stock that one with side vents."

Perhaps, he sometimes thought, sir would like his head pushed through the large plate glass window. At best you could say that George Skinner tolerated his job.

He had endured a difficult day, although it was not in his nature to show it. The signs were, however, when he repeatedly brushed back his receding blond hair with his long fingers, and pursed his pink lips tightly. When this happened, the junior staff were careful to keep out of his way. Not that he had ever lost his temper, but there seemed to be something fermenting away behind that fixed smile that made them feel uncomfortable.

The day had begun with a downpour of freezing rain and a late bus. He had arrived cold and damp, and had hardly removed his coat before the department manager had asked him to organise a stock-check. He had enlisted the help of young Denners, but it had taken all morning to

make the stock balance amid constant interruptions.

The afternoon had not been much better, but at last the clock fingers crept around to five-thirty, and he left the light and warmth of the store for the dark and dampness of the January evening.

He joined the bus queue and turned up the collar of his coat and dug his hands into his warm pockets. The bus was late. There was muttered curses as a uniformed figure approached. The bus inspector apologised and informed them that the fifty-seven had broken down, and a replacement would not arrive for half an hour.

Skinner left them arguing. It was two miles to his lodgings, but he would rather walk than stand about slowly dying of hypothermia.

HE LEFT THE LINES OF NOISY TRAFFIC AND BLINDING HEAD-lights for a short cut through dimly lit back streets. There were few people about; most already home enjoying their tea and watching the news of Britain and the outside world. About halfway home something made him pause on a street corner. Some thirty yards away, a bridge, which once carried a railway line spanned the narrow road. At the bottom of the embankment beneath a sodium street lamp, a group of four youths were lounging about on a low wall.

Skinner fell back against the side of a house. His breath came in short sharp gasps, and he felt he might vomit. They looked familiar somehow: jeans, denim jackets, hunched shoulders. Suddenly he was eighteen again, and the memory of that time warped his vision and made his body shake.

He peeped around the corner and felt dizzy. They were still there; then just beyond the circle of light he saw another figure, smaller, walking past them. As the boy drew level with them, something insulting was said to him. The boy refused to be drawn and carried on until one of the youths grabbed him by the collar and butted him to the pavement.

Skinner watched, petrified, knowing what would come next. They formed a circle around the fallen figure so he could not escape. Then it started — thud, thud, thud, as they took turns kicking the boy.

Why don't I do something? Skinner thought. *What's wrong with me?*

The boy's screams echoed queerly in his head until he thought something would burst. The kicking continued, an obscene rhythmic

dance, and above the screams, the hoarse insane laughter of the gang.

"Bobby, Bobby, Bobby . . ." Skinner sobbed over and over until spittle formed on his lips.

Suddenly the screams, the laughter, stopped. When he looked again there was no sign of the boy lying on the pavement, just the four youths, acting about and swearing.

"I'm sorry, Bobby," Skinner whispered. "I'm sorry."

MRS. MATHERS HEARD THE FRONT DOOR SHUT JUST AS Coronation Street was coming on. She started to rise from the sofa and shouted: "Mr. Skinner, is that you?" The question was a little irrelevant as he was the only lodger she had. Without waiting for a reply she opened the living room door just as he was hanging up his coat on a peg in the hall.

"Mr. Skinner, you look frozen! I was getting worried, where have you been? Come on in and get warmed by the fire while I put your tea on."

She turned up the gas fire and he stood in front of it rubbing his anemic hands together.

"Damn bus service," he muttered by way of explanation, "I was late for work this morning and had to walk it home tonight!" He was pale faced and his eyes stared straight ahead through the lenses of his glasses.

"Yes," she said, laying a chubby hand on his arm. Her fingers were like pork sausages. "Now you sit down. The kettle's nearly boiled."

He did as he was told. There was a table next to the sideboard with one leaf pulled out. A large square mat with Blackpool Tower on it rested on the polished table top. A knife and fork lay to either side. Skinner fidgeted with the salt cellar while the television went on in a monotonous blur in the back ground.

He had too many things on his mind to enjoy the plate of liver and onions she placed before him. His boney jaw masticated the food mechanically. After drinking a second cup of tea he went upstairs to change. Ten minutes later he entered the sitting room pulling on his navy overcoat.

"Off out again all ready, Mr. Skinner? You'll get ulcers rushing around like that. That's what helped finish off my Terry."

She glanced up at him through a gap in the commercials, one hand buried in a box of Quality Street on her lap. Mrs. Mathers was well over forty, and although not actually plump, she had a full figure. She generally looked after herself however, and was not unattractive for her age.

"Just out for a walk," he said, avoiding her gaze, "I'll see you later then."

HE LEFT BY THE KITCHEN DOOR. IT WAS COLDER THAN EVER outside. His breath formed in the air as he walked carefully over the uneven flags of the garden path. The slats of the garden fence were dripping with moisture from the saturated air.

In a corner of the garden was a shed. He fumbled with a padlock, then glanced back at the row of terraced houses before slipping inside. He closed the door, and after making sure the small window was covered over, struck a match then applied it to a candle in a saucer on the work bench. The yellow light fluttered, leaving much of the shed in shadow.

Skinner peered towards the back of the shed, then spoke in a whisper. "Hello, Bobby."

(gotta kill gotta go kill kill find them see them gotta go kill kill them...)

He walked across to a pile of sacks and uncovered an axe. Its blade, clean, and smeared in 3-in-1 oil, glistened in the candle light. Skinner's long, greedy fingers closed around the shaft, and immediately some life in it surged through his body. He cradled the flat of the blade against his cheek, savouring its coldness.

"Bobby, Bobby..." he cooed.

Then he unbuttoned his overcoat and placed the axe in a pocket especially made for it. He left the shed then opened the creaking mildewed gate and made off down the entry towards the road.

THERE WAS TRAFFIC ON THE MAIN ROAD, AND PEOPLE OUT for an evening at the local pub or club, but none of these concerned him. He merged into the back streets where it was quieter, where the street lighting was poor, and where most people stayed behind curtained windows and exchanged gossip. He would give them something to talk about. Soon. Through the fabric of the coat he felt the

axe move and sensed the life in it.

He stopped several yards from the old railway bridge. There were six of them now, four youths and two girls. He began to tremble violently, and only by gripping the axe could his fear and excitement be controlled.

To him they seemed to be acting out a primeval neanderthal ritual under the pale light of the lone street lamp. There was some sort of play going on between the girls and the youths. The youths swore in deep guttural tones, and one of the girls screamed in mock indignation as a hand crudely snatched at her breast.

(gotta go go see them see them kill! kill! yes yes yes . . .)

He hated them. He hated them. He hated them all. He could always recognise them, and one in particular . . . Yet that hate was mingled with fear because of what they had done to poor Bobby. Through the coat pocket he gripped the shaft even tighter, and slid into the shadows as a car drove by. He remained there, waiting.

BY DEGREES THE GROUP BEGAN TO DISPERSE. FINALLY THE remaining two youths separated, one walking in Skinner's direction. He was the one Skinner had kept a special eye on. He was the one who; had shouted his mouth off the loudest, gesticulated the wildest and uttered the foulest language. Skinner hated him more than the others.

He watched the youth slouch up the railway embankment and walk along the disused track, evidently taking a short cut home. Skinner followed.

In the darkness he could just see the outline of the figure before him. He was taller than he appeared from the road but this did not bother Skinner. As the gap between them closed, he could make out some white letters painted on the back of his leather jacket: QUO; AC/DC STONES

The youth, suddenly aware that he was being followed, spun around. His eyes grew wide, unsure.

"Hey, wot's up mate — summat wrong, you bent or summat?"

They had both stopped, facing one another. In the distance the lights from the M62 snaked through the night. Skinner said nothing but undid his overcoat.

"Christ, yer friggin' mad!"

The youth backed away and turned to run, but all ready it was too late. Like a crazed pendulum the axe crashed through the air and buried itself in his right shoulder, partly severing the neck.

There issued a gurgle that could have been the embryo of a scream, followed by a wet sound as the axe was jerked back, allowing the figure to collapse face down. Skinner hacked at the leather jacket, chopping the white letters into blood-soaked pieces.

Before returning to the streets Skinner wiped the axe head in some long grass, then placed it in a polythene bag in order not to mark his clothes.

The house was in darkness when he returned. He hung up his coat, then tiptoed upstairs to his room. He was feeling very excited. When he had finished in the bathroom, he paused outside on the landing and listened.

Mrs. Mathers' bedroom door was fractionally open and he could hear her regular breathing. Quietly he slipped inside and stood over her bed. The sheets were folded down exposing her nakedness. He reached out a hand to touch her but then a pair of arms came up and pulled him downwards.

"DID YOU ENJOY YOUR WALK LAST NIGHT, MR. SKINNER?"

He was at the breakfast table eating a boiled egg. He smiled and looked across at her fleetingly as he swallowed a mouthful. The egg was just how he liked it, hot and runny. He told her the walk had been fine, then flashed her another smile before hurrying for his bus.

It began like any other day. Open at nine, then coerce the junior staff into straightening the stock. Attend to a price adjustment circular given him by Mr. Hayes, the departmental manager, then off to lunch.

In the afternoon he was in conversation with Ralph Kirby from the electrical department, when he was interrupted by Vennor, one of the sales staff, a boy of eighteen.

"Mr. Skinner, have you a minute, please?"

He looked down at the boy through the lenses of his glasses. Vennor was obviously flustered by something.

"Yes, Paul, what's the problem?"

"There's a customer over by the cash desk who bought a shirt two weeks ago. He claims it's too big and demands a refund."

“Well?”

Vennor glanced at Mr. Kirby and licked his thick lips before replying.

“I think you should look at it, Mr. Skinner. It looks knackered to me. Fit for the bin.”

He brushed past Vennor up the stairs to his department, and as he approached the cash & wrap his heart began to pound. If it was possible, he would have turned around and walked away.

Slouched against the counter beside a nervous looking cashier was a tall youth. There was something about his greasy hair and leather bomber jacket that made Skinner feel afraid. On the back of his jacket were some white letters. Skinner knew it was not possible, but . . . The youth clutched a crumpled bag and his jaw sawed on a piece of gum.

“Can I help you?”

The youth looked him up and down.

“Yeah, I’ve brought this back. The old woman bought it for me. It don’t fit and I wouldn’t be seen dead in it meself. I want the ten quid she paid for it, see?”

Skinner picked the shirt up off the counter and examined it.

“I’m sorry, but in this state I can’t even let you exchange it, never mind authorise a refund.”

“Look I know my rights. What do you mean ‘in this state’?”

“The shirt’s obviously been worn, it’s — well — soiled.”

“Look, mate, are you gonna give me my money back or not?”

As he spoke he stood up to his full height and prodded Skinner in the chest.

“No.” Skinner replied.

The youth snatched back the shirt and started towards the large double doors. Turning, he shouted. “Don’t think you’ve heard the last of me, mister!” Then he was gone.

Skinner effected a nervous smile at the cashier then marched away, oblivious to some customers who had paused, listening to the altercation.

A FEW DAYS LATER SKINNER NOTICED THE YOUTH HANGING about outside the store. He stood in the cold, hands in jean pockets, jaw moving rhythmically, occasionally staring through the plate glass.

Sometimes his friends were there, but usually he was alone.

What was he doing there, sometimes for hours on end? More than likely the boy was out of work, like a lot of the youngsters in the town, Skinner conjectured.

One night towards the end of February Skinner boarded his bus as usual for home. It was full so he had to stand. His tired gaze wandered about until it was arrested by one of the steamed up windows a few feet away. Someone had written on it with their finger. The letters had run but they seemed to spell out the name BOBBY

He gripped the handrail fiercely as the figure sitting next to the window turned and stared at him. There was no mistaking the black bomber jacket. A grin spread across the greasy acned complexion. Skinner got off two stops early. As he hurried through the dark back streets he could hear footsteps following. Then it began to rain.

Suddenly he dived down a back alley out of sight. The youth followed, stepping through the puddles that had begun to form between the uneven pavement flags. When he looked down the alley Skinner had disappeared.

The alley ran along the rear of a row of terraced houses. The youth trod carefully, the only sound besides the rain, a click as the blade of a knife flicked into view. He moved silently past the lighted kitchen windows and postage stamp back yards, braced for a sudden movement, the slightest sound.

Then he heard a muffled cough. He stopped, holding the knife before him, trying to pinpoint it; then he heard it again, close by. It came from a brick coal house in one of the yards. He paused outside the wooden door, a sneer on his face, the rain drumming insanely on the corrugated roof. His hair was plastered to his scalp and the cold wetness ran down his neck, but he did not care. Then he became impatient.

“Right, come on out, you bastard!”

There was no reply, no movement, so he kicked at the door and it swung open. There was someone standing in the darkness of the coal house.

“You think you’re better ‘an me ‘cause you wear a suit and bloody tie! Think you can show me up, make a bloody fool of me — don’t you!” he snarled, sweeping the knife in a wide arc. “Don’t you!”

he repeated hoarsely, moving closer.

"Yes!" came the reply, and with it an axe, swinging through the air, smashing down into his skull.

There was a sickening crunch, like a coconut cloven in two. Brain tissue and bone fragments splattered in all directions, and blood, dark brown in the dirty light, slobbered out from the eye sockets, nostrils and mouth, washed away by the relentless rain. The figure collapsed to the concrete yard with the axe embedded in the skull.

Skinner leapt out of the coal house and took hold of the axe shaft and twisted it first one way and then the other in a futile attempt to wrench it free. The head twisted about so he put one foot on the face to hold it still, but the axe was stuck in the brain cavity.

Suddenly a door opened further along the row of houses. A man with rolled up shirt sleeves stood in an oblong of light trying to peer into the darkness. He shouted something, a question, and in the distance a dog barked.

In an insane fit of passion Skinner jerked frantically at the shaft, back and forth, back and forth. The body jerked in sympathy like a wooden jointed puppet.

"Bobby, Bobby, Bobby . . ." Skinner chanted.

He made one final attempt; then there was a loud crack as the neck broke. With tears mingling with the rain, he let go of the axe and took to his heels. A few seconds later he heard a scream and voices raised in panic.

WHEN AT LAST HE REACHED HIS LODGINGS, HE HID HIS bloodsplattered overcoat in the shed, then went straight upstairs to bed, sobbing himself to sleep.

He awoke to daylight and a hand upon his forehead. It belonged to Mrs. Mathers, who smiled down at him and stroked him tenderly. Then he felt her warm hand slide beneath the sheets.

"Now then, Mr. Skinner, what's wrong? No tea, no breakfast, and you've missed your bus to work. Aren't you feeling well?"

"Bobby," he said. "Bobby's gone. I lost Bobby . . ."

"That was a long time ago, Mr. Skinner. Don't worry, I'll make it better for you."

She slipped into bed beside him, but he just stared up at the cracked,

ceiling, muttering.

He was ill. He stayed off work for over a week. Nervous exhaustion the doctor called it. A few days later, while lying in bed, he heard Mrs. Mathers talking to Mrs. Bennet over the garden fence.

"How's he feeling today, then?"

"A bit better, but he'll be off work a few more days yet."

"Do you think his relatives should know?"

"There isn't any family, least not anyone he's bothered about. He had a friend though, once . . ."

"I see that mad axeman hasn't been caught yet. I don't feel safe in me own house anymore. Only last night a youngster was stabbed to death by a gang of thugs at the new bus station. They should bring back 'anging I say . . ."

Skinner dragged himself out of bed and slowly dressed. His face was drained and his eyes behind his glasses were sunk deep within their sockets. He felt light headed as he crept downstairs and pulled on his anorak.

"And where do you think you're going?"

Mrs. Mathers had come back into the house through the kitchen. He fumbled with the front door handle.

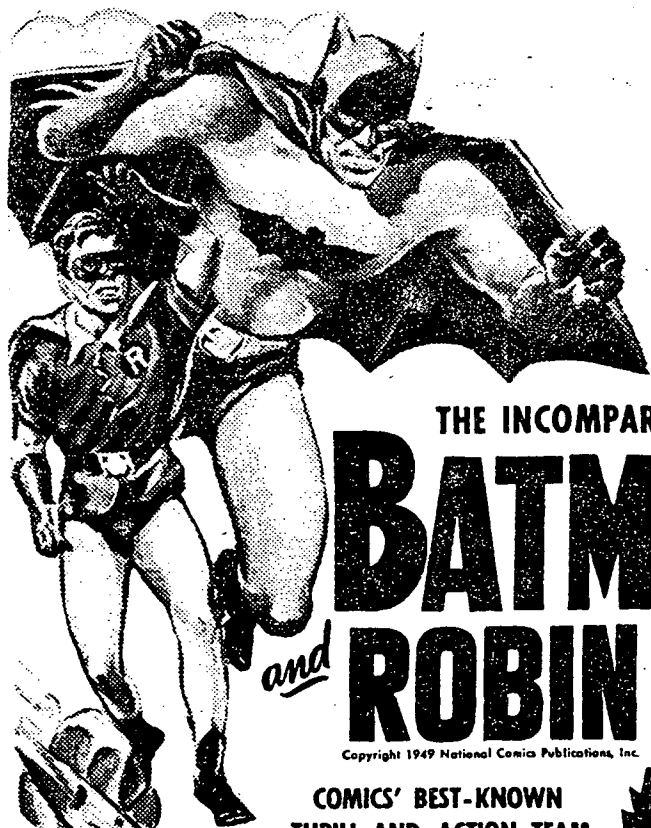
"Air, Mrs. Mathers. I need some fresh air. Walk. Won't be long."

HE SLOUCHED ALONG THE GREY PAVEMENT. A COLD BREEZE moved through his untidy hair, but he was oblivious to anything but the thoughts going through his mind. At the corner shop he bought an evening paper and read with revulsion about the young boy, Garry Booth, who had died of stab wounds for the fifty pence bus fare he had in his pocket.

Skinner wandered morosely down to the local shops more depressed than ever, glancing through lighted windows without seeing anything. Suddenly he stopped. He stood in front of a hardware store. There, in the middle of the window display, was an axe.

His eyes focused sharply on its cruel, finely-honed blade. He broke into a sweat as he imagined his hands closing around the white wooden shaft.

"Hello, Garry," he whispered.



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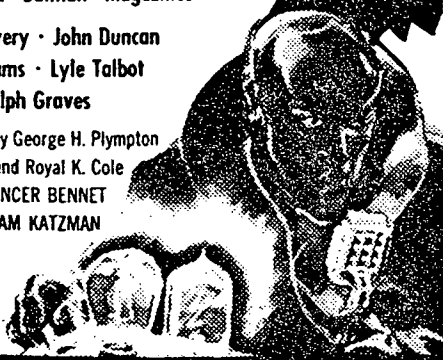
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*Bullfighting was a bloody business, but generally it was
the bull's blood that got spilled!*

The Matador Murder

by A. M. LIGHTNER

YOU KNOW ME. JULIUS OGLETREE. PROFESSOR OGLETREE.
I've worked all summer on the excavations at the head of the valley.
Truth is, I didn't want to come to Mexico in the first place. Went to
Crete the last three summers. Very productive dig we had there.

But when Dr. Harden asked me to take over for him here, there

really was no way I could get out of it. I studied under him, you see, and I owe him a great deal. When he was hospitalized and realized there was no chance of his coming this season, he begged me to take his place. His work is more important than mine, and the group in Crete will just have to get along without us this year.

Nina — that's my wife — didn't like the idea any better than I did. She says that Mexico just makes her homesick for Greece. There's the same hot sun, the same native workers. She had put in a lot of effort to learn Greek and now she has to stumble along with her bit of Spanish.

That was my first disappointment, when Nina refused to work at the dig. She's not a trained archeologist, but she'd picked up enough to be a real help in Crete. Here she made friends with the wife of Dr. Harden's Mexican assistant and went off with her to museums and curio shops. I hardly saw her at all the first month.

Juan Vasquez, the young assistant, has been a great help. I have to admit that. Went out of his way to find us comfortable quarters. And when he and I were out at the dig, Nina practically lived with Pilar Vasquez. She seemed so happy there. They were such good friends, you understand, that I was able to stop worrying about her and apply myself to the work. Then one night Pilar and Juan Vasquez gave a party.

Yes, the party was the beginning of all the trouble. But after weeks of hard work, we were due for a bit of relaxation. It was at the party that I first met Tullio Mendola. Oh, I suppose he was there all the time, but what you don't know about doesn't hurt, as the saying goes.

I WAS SITTING IN A CORNER WITH JUAN, ENJOYING A QUIET drink and talk, when I noticed he was paying very little attention to my discourse on Cretan history. Well, who could blame him if he was more interested in what lies beneath his home soil?

Then I saw the reason. His eyes never left his wife, who was talking to guests at the far end of the room. And trailing along with her was a dark, handsome man who moved with the sinuous grace of a cat.

"Who the young Lothario, following our wives around?" I asked.

Vasquez made a noise in his throat that was hardly complimentary.

"What! You don't know the great Tullio Mendola? The coming hero of the Corrida? He may be only a novillero this season, but he's already the darling of the ladies and by next year he'll be right up there at the top."

"A bullfighter, eh? I never met one of them before."

"No? Well, come and be introduced." Juan heaved himself out of his seat. "But they don't like the English term. A torero. A matador, if you prefer."

He steered me through the group that surrounded the young man and made the introductions.

"This is Dr. Ogletree. Here in charge of our excavations. You've already met his wife, I see. Professor, our young torero, Tullio Mendola."

Tullio was very polite as he shook hands and hastened to present the older man standing beside him.

"Senor Luis Ramirez, my manager. This is the husband of Nina. El Profesor, who is so busy with the digging?"

Tullio spoke English with a heavy accent, ending most sentences on a question, as though apologizing for possible misuse of the language. I had to admit his charm, but his manager was another matter. A short, pockmarked individual with a swarthy complexion, he exuded a possessive, guardian attitude toward Tullio that irked me.

Well, I suppose he was like any manager or agent back home. He had probably sunk all his savings in the young bullfighter and he was only guarding his nest egg. I thought no more about the matter till a few days later when Vasquez and I were working at the dig and he made some quite violent remarks about the bullfighter. I told him flatly not to be jealous.

"Jealous!" cried Juan, his voice rising in emotion. "You see nothing to be jealous about? It's all very well for you. You'll go back north at the end of the season and never lay eyes on the scoundrel again. But we're going to be right here when the winter season opens. And there's no doubt that Tullio will be moving up. Unless he makes a mistake and some bull gores him. And there's small chance of that." Juan's excitement had given place to despair. "He's on the way to the top all right, and he'll have every woman in Mexico at his feet, including my Pilar!"

IT ALL SEEMED HIGHLY EXAGGERATED TO ME AT THE TIME. A silly little storm in a teacup. But I did my best to console Juan. After all, he couldn't put his mind on his work if he was constantly worrying about what his wife was doing.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," I told him. "The two girls do everything together. And if he becomes as popular as you say, he's bound to have more and more women after him. He won't

have the time to spend with our girls. You'll see, he'll get tired of them."

I didn't hear any more about Tullio for awhile after that, and I fancied the whole thing had blown over. But then one night Nina said something about bullfighting that really stopped me in my tracks. It wasn't like her to go for anything like that. In fact, when we first came down, she'd complained that she didn't like the Aztecs because of their horrible rituals.

"Bullfights, Nina! Isn't that a bit out of your line?"

"Oh, I know. It's a terribly bloody sport. But only at the end, and then I shut my eyes when they get ready to kill the bull. The rest is picturesque and quite beautiful."

"And you're the girl who was complaining about the bloody Aztecs!"

"That was human sacrifice. Tullio has explained it to me."

"Not so very different," I said.

A new line of thought opened up before me. Perhaps that was one reason why the Spaniards introduced bullfighting. As a substitute, a sublimation for the bloody rites the Indians were accustomed to. I came back from these speculations just in time to hear Nina say:

"And it's especially exciting when there's somebody you know doing it!"

That was the second shock within five minutes. Nina was not going to bullfights just for something to do. She was going to watch Tullio perform. And it was an easy jump for me to change somebody she knew to somebody she liked. Perhaps even loved?

I began to think that Juan might have known what he was talking about. There was just one flaw in his argument: it was my wife, not his, who was being seduced!

AFTER THAT I BEGAN TO KEEP TRACK OF HOW MANY TIMES Tullio turned up at the apartment. When it got to be five days a week, I spoke to Nina about it.

"Doesn't that man have any place else to go? He seems to be under foot all the time."

"But surely you don't mind, do you?" cried Nina. "You're down at the dig all day and Juan is so ridiculously jealous. It makes it hard for Pilar if he comes home and finds us there, so we've taken to coming over here."

She was so sweetly sincere that I couldn't doubt her. I made a joke of it and told her to be careful about Juan's Latin temperament. Then as soon as I was back at the dig I found myself wondering what she was doing. What she and Tullio were doing! I looked at Juan and began to appreciate his worries.

There's always a breaking point and for me it came one day when I stayed in town to go over some notes. I was sitting at my desk, admiring the view of Popocatepetl, when I heard loud Spanish voices in the vestibule. Someone spoke to Nina in a familiar tone, and then Tullio stuck his head into my room.

"Ah, Senor El Profesor! Forgive that I disturb you."

He was trying to back out, but I got up and followed him.

"Well, well, the bullfighter!" I said, trying to sound friendly. "How goes the degenerating sport?"

Tullio froze, his hand outstretched. Nina squealed from the doorway.

"Julius! What do you think you're saying?"

"But you misunderstood me. I didn't mean that Tullio is degenerating. Far from it. I meant that the sport of bullfighting has degenerated from its once high and noble origins."

Tullio drew himself up as though facing the bull in the arena.

"And how imagine such a thing, Senor? Bullfighting, as you call it, has an ancient and honorable tradition. Everything must be done exactly as it is prescribed, for centuries and centuries from past custom. How then can it possibly be this vile word that you say?"

"But I see you don't really know the evolution of your sport."

I spoke calmly and the agitation went out of Nina's face. At my suggestion, she went away to prepare refreshments, leaving Tullio to me, which was just what I wanted. I drew him back into the study and launched upon one of my favorite lectures.

"Centuries are one thing, Tullio. But how about millenia, eh? It's not yet five hundred years since the Spaniards introduced your sport from Europe. It may not have changed much in that time. But what would you say to thirty-six hundred years?"

"Thirty-six hundred!" cried Tullio, becoming intrigued in spite of himself. "Surely men were living in caves in those times."

"Not quite. Come and let me show you."

I opened a large book for him. It was one of the few we had brought with us to remind us now and then of our work on Crete. It was beautifully illustrated with art from recent excavations. I flipped over the pages.

"Here we are. Ever see anything like this?"

Tullio bent to look. A great bull, so huge that the humans were dwarfed beside it. But these young men and maidens, too, were playing with the bull. One youth held its horns. Another had already vaulted upon its back. Tullio stared.

"This is three thousand years old?" he asked.

"As near as we can determine. It comes from that period. The new palaces of Crete. This is a picture of the bull dances that were performed in the courtyards of those palaces."

Tullio was impressed. "Thirty-six hundred years!" he muttered.

"You must realize that the game was very different then. Note that the athletes have no weapons whatever. And not as much clothing as you wear. Only a loin cloth and a jewel here and there."

"Aren't they graceful!" cried Nina, who had come in with a tray. "See how they somersaulted onto the bull's back."

"Took hold of his horns, as you see," I added.

"Julius has spent years digging up things like this," she explained.

Tullio whistled as he turned the pages. "So that's how it all started. You must admit, Senor, it has come a long way."

"Ah — but in which direction?" I was determined to make him see it my way. "Those young people faced bulls that were just as dangerous as yours, and they had no weapons. In fact, the bulls could not be harmed. They were sacred animals. Here you see, in this picture they are bringing one in from pasture. He's controlled only with a kind of rope net. We believe the dancers first wore out the bull, getting him to chase them and jumping out of the way, much as you do in your . . . er . . . Veronica? But nobody stuck spears into the bull or broke his shoulder muscles, as I hear is customary before you matadors take over. No, the bull was never harmed, no matter what happened to the dancers."

"They did not kill the bull?" Tullio was astounded. "That would never do today, Senor Profesor. The fans would not be satisfied. They must have blood."

"Oh, they had blood in those days," I assured him. "The audiences were every bit as bloodthirsty. But it was not the bull's blood."

IT WAS THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF VERBAL TILTS THAT TULLIO and I had about bull fighting. At first it was half in fun. I enjoyed the opportunity to needle him about his sport and its practitioners. Bull-

fighters today could not possibly be as adept, as brave, as graceful as those ancient athletes who went naked into the courtyards with the bulls.

But little by little, my gibes became more barbed. I remembered what Juan had said. That Tullio would make it to the top of his profession unless he made a mistake. Unless a bull gored him. I was amazed to discover the pleasure I took in imagining Tullio being gored. And Nina would be there to watch. Perhaps it would knock all this silliness out of her. But I feared he would not be gored. He was much too good for that. Only if he made a mistake. The mistake, perhaps, of thinking himself as good as the Minoan dancers.

Oh, I knew perfectly well what I was doing. I was jealous. I had every reason to be jealous. But I didn't have the guts to pick a fight and try to knock the man down. Or even to order him from my house. But if I could influence his better judgement . . . if I could start him on the road that would lead to that one mistake!

Each time I saw him, I had a more extravagant suggestion.

"Swords today, perhaps guns tomorrow, Tullio? Why not a real duel, with pistols at twenty paces? After all, Tullio, the swords were introduced in an era when swords were in fashion. You should keep up with the times. I believe the machine gun is typical of this technological age."

At first he went along with the joke. He laughed uproariously, but it was a bit overdone. Then he took to avoiding me, or so I imagined. But since he came often to the house and I now made a point of returning almost every day for lunch, he could not escape me entirely.

"Ah, the professor must have his little joke!" he exclaimed, determined to treat me in a sophisticated manner. "What weapon are you suggesting today?"

I looked right at him and thought of the most outrageous possibility.

"Why not a bomb? Perhaps even an atom bomb. Symbol of our age. But no, that would contaminate the arena. The sacred bull is no longer of any consideration, but the arena must not be defaced."

For once I saw Tullio's control crumble. His face was very white and he looked as though he might like to initiate a duel with me right there. I had a nasty feeling that I might have gone too far, but he regained his poise.

"Senor el profesor! You have no understanding of these things. No understanding at all. But I will show you. I prove to you that the

torero of today is as brave and skillful as those you speak of three thousand years ago. There's nothing exceptional about what they did. Any torero today can do it. I will show you."

And with that he turned and marched out.

I had no idea he'd go through with it. But it wasn't Tullio who came back a few days later. It was that manager of his, pounding at my door. Before I could remember his name, he was trying to drag me out of the house.

"Senor, you must come at once! Something terrible will happen to Tullio unless you help."

I stared at him. Was it possible that Tullio had taken the bait?

"What's the matter with him?" I asked. "How can I possibly help?"

"Ah, Senor, he admires you. The great professor who has discovered our past. This bull dancing that he speaks of . . . it is madness! It is suicide! Surely nobody can have done such things."

I assured him that they did. "They were accomplished athletes. But Tullio . . . he isn't . . . he hasn't . . . ?"

"But yes, he is trying. He practices even now with a young bull. My best torero. He will be killed! You must come! You must tell him it is all foolishness."

"Well now, I don't know that it's really my place to advise the great Tullio Mendola about bulls."

"Ah, Senor! Everyone tells him it is madness. Nina, your wife, she is pleading with him. But he will believe you."

Nina! Suddenly I didn't want her to see it. I didn't want her hurt.

"Of course, I'll go," I said. "Where is he?"

Ramirez had brought his car and he drove me to a small practice ring on the outskirts of the city. He seemed to be in a great hurry and I got the impression that things had reached a crisis. We arrived and Ramirez rushed me through the gate, past the few rows of seats. I saw Nina and Pilar down at the farther end and Juan Vasquez was with them. They were all staring at the ring and I turned to look in that direction.

It's one thing to see this in a picture and another to watch it in real life. The bull was immense and it was racing around the ring with Tullio balancing himself upon its back. He was naked to the waist, clad only in a pair of jeans, and he seemed to ride the bull with a carefree lightness.

At the right moment, he leaped easily to the ground and turned to

acknowledge the applause. Then he saw me and made a gesture of recognition.

"Ole, el profesor! I show you now!"

"For God's sake, stop him! Get him out of there!" hissed Ramirez.

I knew I should say something . . . do something to bring this farce to an end, but when I opened my mouth, no words came. Somewhere inside me was a feeling of triumph. My plan must be working if Ramirez was in such a funk.

Then Tullio turned to face the bull's charge. He was judging the exact moment to seize the horns and somersault onto the great humped back. But as his hands closed upon the horns, he must have misjudged the speed and force of the bull; or perhaps his foot slipped. He flew through the air, but sidewise, without completing the turn, and fell under the bull's hooves.

I heard Nina scream. The great beast slid to a halt and the horns found their mark. Everything was obscured in a cloud of dust.

"SO THAT'S HOW IT HAPPENED, SENOR POLECIA. I ADMIT IT. I killed him as surely as if I'd shot him with a revolver. I confess it all and I'm ready for whatever they do to you down here: the noose . . . the electric chair . . . the firing squad . . . It hardly matters."

The police official stood up behind his desk and stared at me.

"Dr. Ogletree. Please. We do not have the death penalty in Mexico. But calm yourself. You have done nothing illegal. You have been very helpful. There has been a murder, yes. But you did not do it. The actions you suggested to Tullio Mendola are acts that any beginning bullfighter might perform. They climb all over the bull when they are learning. Tullio did such things when he was a boy — but always with a gentle bull. No, it was Juan Vasquez who bribed the driver to let in a different bull. One that looked much like the animal Tullio had been using, but far more dangerous."

It was my turn to stare in disbelief.

"You mean, I didn't kill him? But I tried . . . I wanted . . ."

"To want is one thing, Senor. To do is another. No, Dr. Ogletree, we have the murderer and his confession, and now we have your testimony to confirm it. You are free to go. And do not worry too much about Senor Vasquez. The judge may be lenient. The young man had great provocation. You see, it was *his* wife who was being seduced." ●



Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS

by JOHN BALL

Something that should please every mystery fan is the Fingerprint Mystery series being offered by St. Martin's Press. These are unusually attractive quality paperback reprints with distinctive photographic covers and good paper stock inside. The four titles just being released are *A Sort of Samurai* by James Melville, Bill Pronzini's *Scattershot*, *Troubled Deaths* by Roderic Jeffries and *The Witch Hill Murder* by Pauline Glen Winslow. All of these are uniformly priced at \$5.95 and will look fine on your bookshelves. Our favorite in this series is *A Sort of Samurai* which brings home the fact that the Japanese police are very like our own and also definitely know their business. A lot of good entertainment is available here at a modest price.

☆ ☆ ☆

A first novel which grabs immediate attention is *Passage* by Dean Fuller. It is always the mark of a gifted author when he can interest the reader in a field with which he is totally unacquainted; Mr. Fuller writes about trans-Atlantic one-man yacht racing and makes every moment live. When a yacht is found adrift at sea, with the skipper missing, she is open to salvage. The boat yard owner who built her is determined to recover her, but so are others. This is a fast-paced, very well written book that makes good use of the author's expert knowledge of his subject. There is one serious flaw: the outcome depends on a very special ability of one of the key persons in the story. The reader is not told of this until the last few pages; if it had been given earlier this would have been a strong Edgar candidate. (Dodd Mead, \$13.95)

Davis Brierley gave us a fine spy story in *Big Bear, Little Bear*. Now he offers his new work, *Shooting Star*, which is essentially the story of a man and woman who are reunited after a long time in London. The story is filled with long and intense flashbacks of the Hungarian revolution. Unless the horrors of that lost cause appeal to you, this work is not likely to have a great deal of interest. (Scribners, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Mystery collectors with long memories will recall *The Dime Novel Roundup* which, for fifty-one years, chronicled the dime novel, the authors who wrote them, and the background of their publication. Now the indefatigable Michael Cook has produced an annotated index to the whole series, with his usual high degree of accuracy. It's a specialized item, but a valuable one to those interested. (The Popular Press, Bowling Green University, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403. \$12.95 in hard cover, & \$6.95 in paperback.)

☆ ☆ ☆

Also from Popular Press is *Yesterday's Faces*, a study of series characters in the early pulp magazines. Robert Sampson is the author. The first volume, *Glory Figures*, contains a lot of very readable background material and analysis. (\$20.95 in hardback, \$10.95 in soft cover.)

☆ ☆ ☆

Backlash by Martin Russell is an ingenious story with more switches than the Chicago rail yards. Furthermore, they are expertly done so that just when the reader thinks that he has things figured out, he is jolted again. There are undertones of humor, but all over this is a very good suspense story with an ending that is close to unique. It would make an excellent play. (Walker and Co., \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Margaret Millar is the latest recipient of the Mystery Writers of America's Grand Master award, and most deservedly so. She has a highly lucid writing style and a fine Italian hand when it comes to plot construction. Her newest book is called *Banshee*. It is most notable for some engaging people, particularly a slightly dotty ex-madam who is living high on her estate in retirement and a hypochondriac alcoholic who is still trying to be a femme fatale. The story concerns the death of a little girl, a subject not often treated in the literature. The ending is not up to her high standard and will disappoint some readers; otherwise another in the considerable list of Mrs. Millar's notable achievements. (Morrow, \$10.95)



Jessica Mann offers *The Sting of Death*, the eighth in her series of British crime stories. This one is unfortunately overloaded with bucolic details of life in South Cornwall with the crime element almost negligible. The police make a token appearance with no effective result. International terrorism is supposed to be the key here, but it doesn't come off. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)



The newest anthology to be published under Alfred Hitchcock's name is *Fatal Attractions*. Elana Lore is the editor who put together these 21 stories of suspense and the supernatural. All of them are reprints from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*; some of them go all the way back to Charles Dickens, who knew a good crime story when he saw one. For bedtime reading in unhaunted houses. (The Dial Press, \$12.95)



PAPERBACK NOTES: Dodd Mead is now offering Red Badge mysteries in a uniform paperback series with modern attractive covers. Uniformly priced at \$3.50, the titles include *House Above Hollywood* by Velda Johnston, *Girl on a High Wire* by Rae Foley, Ursula Curtis' *Widow's Web*, and *Do You Know This Voice* by Evelyn Berckman . . . Another good series is Walker British Mysteries; the latest additions include *Change for the Worse* by Elizabeth Lemarchand, Jeffrey Ashford's *Three Layers of Guilt*, and *Victim* by Josephine Bell and *Moscow Road* by Simon Harvester. All are \$2.95 . . . Avon is in the lists with some engaging new titles, they include *The Cortes Letter*, an original by Michael Gillette (\$2.75), *All that Glitters* by Elizabeth Powers (\$2.50), and *King Cobra* by William C. Matthews, which sends agent David Caine after a top Mexican mobster and sadist. Not for the faint of heart, but a good James Bond type original adventure. (\$2.75) . . . Robert Barnard, who is always good, appears in Penguin's offering of his *Blood Brotherhood* at \$2.95 . . . A first novel specifically for women is *With Friends Like These* by Liza Fosburgh. A happy housewife is gradually undone by her close friend who wants to take her place. Pocket Books, \$3.50 . . . If you want a tip on first-class crime story telling, we suggest *Parting Breath* by the ever entertaining Catherine Aird. Bantam offers it at \$2.25. ●

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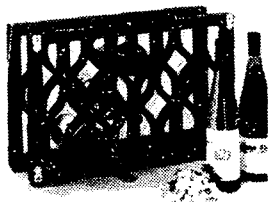
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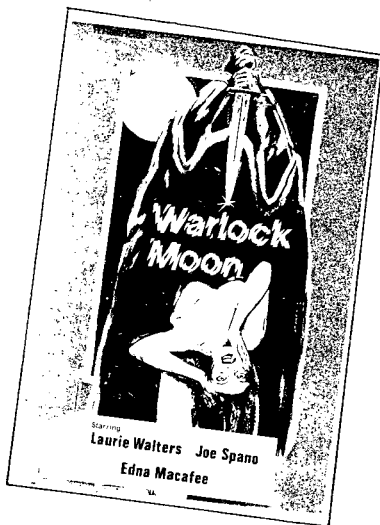
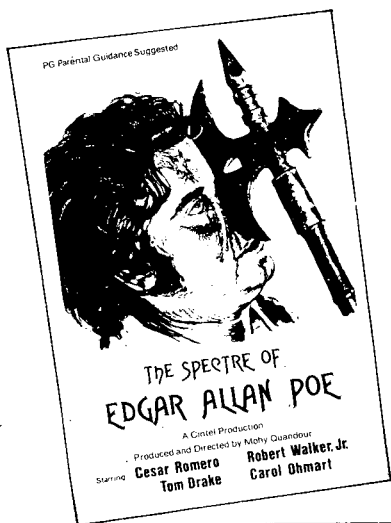


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